



Buffalo Sabres

Daily Press Clips

December 16, 2016

Isles aim to end skid against Sabres

Associated Press

December 16, 2016

BUFFALO, N.Y. -- Following a rare offensive burst in a win over the Los Angeles Kings on Tuesday, the Buffalo Sabres are finally getting healthier on the back end.

After dealing with injuries on defense all season long, the Sabres (11-11-6) see the light at the end of the tunnel heading into a matchup with the New York Islanders on Friday. Defensemen Zach Bogosian and Taylor Fedun participated in practice on Thursday and both are nearing a return to the lineup -- which would give the Sabres a full roster of defensemen for one of the first times this season.

"As a team, it's great," Fedun said, according to The Buffalo News. "We've had some key injuries back there. It's definitely a good problem for us to have going forward."

"We haven't been in that situation the whole year long, so frankly it's a new situation for us here at the 29-game mark," Sabres head coach Dan Bylsma said, according to The Buffalo News. "Each defenseman that's stepped up and played for us has brought a little bit different element."

Buffalo squares off against the Islanders at 7 p.m. on Friday.

Bogosian has not played since Nov. 1 due to a knee sprain. The veteran is one of Buffalo's top defensemen when healthy. Fedun last played on Dec. 3. When both return, the Sabres will likely have to send a player back down to the AHL with eight defensemen on the roster.

In a 6-3 win over Los Angeles on Tuesday, the Sabres scored four goals in a span of 6:13 for a comeback win. Sophomore standout Jack Eichel had two goals and an assist, and Ryan O'Reilly, Brian Gionta, Evander Kane and Sam Reinhart also scored for the Sabres.

"Once we kind of got on a role, we stayed with it," O'Reilly said. "Goal after goal, you could feel the life in the building. Everything just kind of changed. We took the game over."

The Sabres have five games over the next eight days before their holiday break.

"After the loss to Washington, we really looked at these six games before the break for us to really bear down and focus here," Bylsma said, according to the team's website. "I think that's really why the L.A. win is a real big win for this group and one we want to keep going here. ... It's just a stretch of time in the season where we really have to bear down and try and get some wins here and go on a roll."

The Islanders (11-13-5) are coming off three consecutive losses, including a 5-4 loss to the Chicago Blackhawks on Thursday night. The Islanders lost in a back-and-forth affair on Richard Panik's tie-breaking goal with just over six minutes remaining.

In each of those losses, the Islanders have entered the third period tied only to fall late.

"Turn around, right back at it tomorrow night," Islanders defenseman Travis Hamonic said. "Points are crucial this time of year. We're well aware of what's at stake and where we want to get to as a group. We've been playing some good hockey. We've just got to get right back into it."

According to Newsday, youngster J-F Berube will get the start for the Islanders in net against Buffalo. It will be the first start of the season for him.

Sabres Notebook: Healthy defense; USA Hockey camp opens

By John Vogl

The Buffalo News

December 15, 2016

Justin Falk has a fresh cut under his right eye. Other than that, Buffalo's defensemen are healthy.

That's a rarity.

The Sabres have had their full complement of defensemen just eight times this season. It hasn't happened since Nov. 1, but it is possible coach Dan Bylsma will have everyone at his disposal Friday when the New York Islanders visit KeyBank Center. Eight blue-liners practiced Thursday, which should give Bylsma choices of which six to dress.

"As a team, it's great," defenseman Taylor Fedun said in HarborCenter. "We've had some key injuries back there. It's definitely a good problem for us to have going forward."

Fedun (upper body) and Zach Bogosian (knee) practiced with the team for the first time since suffering injuries. They joined Rasmus Ristolainen, Jake McCabe, Dmitry Kulikov, Josh Gorges, Cody Franson and Falk.

Bogosian and Fedun were going to meet with the medical staff to determine their return dates. If Bogosian is ready, it's possible Falk or Fedun will return to Rochester. The other could stay as the seventh defenseman.

"We haven't been in that situation the whole year long, so frankly it's a new situation for us here at the 29-game mark," Bylsma said. "Each defenseman that's stepped up and played for us has brought a little bit different element."

Falk has been a stay-at-home defenseman who has one assist and a plus-1 rating in 15 games. Fedun has helped the offense, recording four assists in eight games before suffering a strained muscle in his chest Dec. 3.

"To be able to get back out there and get in the mix is a great feeling," Fedun said. "I'll get back into things here and hopefully pick up where I left off."

Falk had a gash on his face after a drill in which groups of Sabres competed to clear the puck or keep it in the zone.

"I'm not even quite sure whose stick it was," Falk said. "We're in some battle drills and we're all competing out there, which is good. It gets us ready for the games."

Sabres prospect Casey Fitzgerald and Youngstown native Joe Cecconi will start their final push to make the U.S. world junior team.

USA Hockey will open its junior national team camp Friday in HarborCenter. The event will feature 10 a.m. practices every day through Tuesday, with the public welcome to attend. There will be 26 players at the camp, and the 23-man team will be announced Dec. 24.

Buffalo selected Fitzgerald in the third round of this year's NHL Draft. The defenseman has five goals and 13 points in 19 games with Boston College.

Cecconi grew up playing defense for the Niagara Junior Purple Eagles, Wheatfield Blades, Buffalo Regals and Junior Sabres. A fifth-round pick of the Dallas Stars in 2015, he has one assist in 16 games with the University of Michigan.

While USA Hockey is in town, it will conduct a site survey of New Era Field during Sunday's game between the Bills and Cleveland Browns. Buffalo will host the 2018 world juniors, and the United States and Canada will play an outdoor game in the Bills' stadium Dec. 29, 2017.

Matt Moulson and Evander Kane alternated as the left winger for Jack Eichel and Kyle Okposo during Tuesday's win against Los Angeles. They could do it again versus the Isles.

Moulson skated on Eichel's line during Thursday's practice. Kane, meanwhile, was on a four-person fourth line with Zemgus Girgensons, Nicolas Deslauriers and Derek Grant.

Kane started with Eichel and Okposo against the Kings but got demoted. He jumped back up during the third period and scored a goal. Moulson, who opened with Girgensons and Deslauriers, picked up two assists alongside Eichel and Okposo.

"Moulson was jumping right from the start of game," Bylsma said. "With Zemgus and Deslauriers, they probably had our best shifts in the first period. He got the opportunity in the second period with Jack and Kyle, and did real well. Obviously, they got two huge shifts for us, two big goals for us. He was a part of that.

"Evander, bringing the speed and bringing what he can to his line, got the chance to jump out there in the third and scored a big goal for us."

The annual holiday ornament sale to benefit the Sabres' foundation will take place during Friday's game. The players' wives and girlfriends will sell the \$20 ornaments at the top of the escalators in the 100 Level. Each wrapped ornament will have the autograph of a Sabres player.

Sabres' Christmas wish: Head to holiday on winning streak

By John Vogl

The Buffalo News

December 15, 2016

During a recent talk with the team, Sabres coach Dan Bylsma ditched the "one game at a time" routine. He knew Buffalo's run to the Christmas break was a crucial stretch, and he wanted the players to know it.

They know it.

"You kind of break the season down at times into segments and patches and pieces," defenseman Josh Gorges said Thursday. "We know what our last few games are like heading into the break."

Buffalo will play five games in eight days leading up to Christmas, and all the meetings will have an impact on the Eastern Conference standings:

*The 15th-place Sabres will host the 16th-place New York Islanders on Friday in KeyBank Center. The Sabres have 28 points, while the Isles had 27 heading into Thursday night's home game against Chicago.

*The Sabres will visit 11th-place Carolina on Saturday. The Hurricanes have 30 points, two more than the Sabres, with one extra game played.

*Buffalo will visit 12th-place Florida on Tuesday. The Panthers have 30 points but have played two more games than the Sabres.

*The Hurricanes come to Buffalo next Thursday.

*The Sabres visit the Islanders next Friday.

A run of victories would push the Sabres up at their competitors' expense. A slump would be troublesome heading into the holiday.

"We really looked at these six games before the break for us to really bear down and focus here," Bylsma said after practice in HarborCenter.

The Sabres head into the stretch feeling good after a 6-3 victory over Los Angeles on Tuesday. Beating L.A. is one thing. Taking care of the teams nearby is more important.

"We want to keep going here," Bylsma said. "Yes, you can look at our opponents – Carolina twice and the New York Islanders twice – but it's really just a stretch of time in the season where we really have to bear down, get some wins here and try to get on a roll."

Teams across the Eastern Conference are rolling. Philadelphia (10 straight), Pittsburgh (seven), Columbus (seven) and Washington (five) have combined to win 29 games in a row.

"It's important that we start rattling wins off," center Jack Eichel said. "It seems like every other team's doing it right now, so we've got to stay in the hunt."

The Sabres' longest winning streak is three straight from Oct. 29-Nov. 1. Since then, they are 7-8-4.

"It's tough to gain ground when you win one, lose one; win two, lose two," Gorges said. "We've got to start stringing some games together."

The victory over Los Angeles gave the Sabres a 4-2-1 record since Eichel returned. They've averaged 3.3 goals per game during the stretch compared to 1.8 with the center injured. The offense has a chance to keep it up.

The Islanders, Hurricanes and Panthers are in the middle of the pack for goals allowed. New York had allowed the 11th most heading into Thursday's games. Carolina and Florida were tied for 14th.

One player those teams will need to contain is Kyle Okposo. The Sabres right winger has four goals and 11 points in the last 10 games. In addition to wanting victories, he'll have a personal stake in two of the conference meetings.

Friday's game will be his first against the Islanders after spending the opening nine years of his career with the team. Next Friday's game will be his first trip back to New York.

"It's going to be fun," Okposo said. "I'm excited to play these guys. I still talk to quite a few of them. It's going to be weird playing them, but once you get into the game it will be fun.

"I played with a lot of those guys for a long time. They know my tendencies, I know their tendencies, so that part of it will be a bit of a chess match. I'm looking forward to it."

Sabres' defense finally getting healthy

By Bill Hoppe

Olean Times Herald

December 15, 2016

BUFFALO – A couple of quick updates from HarborCenter, where the Sabres practiced almost an hour today following a day off:

– Zach Bogosian (knee) and Taylor Fedun (shoulder) practiced today, giving the Sabres eight defensemen for the session.

When they return, the Sabres likely won't keep eight defenders. They might, however, keep seven.

"We haven't been at that situation the whole year long," said coach Dan Bylsma, whose Sabres host the New York Islanders on Friday. "Frankly, it's a new situation for us here at the 29-game mark. I think each defenseman that's stepped up and played for us has brought a little bit different element."

– Winger Evander Kane, played beside Jack Eichel and on the fourth line in Tuesday's 6-3 win against Los Angeles, practiced on the fourth line.

Sabres captain Brian Gionta thriving in 15th season

By Bill Hoppe
Olean Times Herald
December 16, 2016

BUFFALO – Sabres coach Dan Bylsma can't tell you how old Brian Gionta is, which illustrates how much he cares about his captain's age.

"I don't even know," Bylsma said Thursday after the Sabres prepared for tonight's tilt against the New York Islanders at KeyBank Center.

Gionta, for the record, is 37 years old, an advanced age when most NHL players are long retired, or, at best, reduced to a bit role.

Occasionally, winger Marcus Foligno will tease Gionta, his friend and linemate – "You call him 'dad' or whatever here or there," he said – about his age.

"I don't know if he likes it too much," Foligno joked inside HarborCenter.

But, Foligno said, Gionta "has the last laugh."

"He's 37 years old and he's still playing in the NHL, so he's doing something right," Foligno said.

The diminutive Gionta is still thriving 952 games into his career.

"I take pride in getting myself ready, trying to be as consistent a player as I can," said Gionta, who has scored twice in the last three games.

Gionta's seven goals – all have come at even strength – are tied for second on the Sabres. His 12 points are tied for fifth. Gionta has averaged 17 minutes, 11 seconds of ice time through 28 games – the team's sixth-highest total among forwards.

"At times, regardless of age, he's leading the way with how we want to play and how we work," Bylsma said. "I don't put ages on that. It could be for as long as he's going to do it that way, he can chase (Jaromir) Jagr down for the oldest guy in the league."

Jagr turns 45 on Feb. 15, so Gionta has a long way to go to reach the one of the NHL's all-time greats. Still, Gionta, a free agent after the season, has no plans to retire.

"I love playing the game," Gionta said. "I love being around it. I still feel good doing it. I still feel good every day. Until that stops, the mindset won't change."

Gionta hasn't changed his style much, either. The right winger has been a smart, speedy presence beside Foligno and center Johan Larsson all season.

The Sabres' most consistent and reliable line in years – Bylsma put it together last winter – is technically a checking trio, although it has also combined to score 16 goals.

In today's NHL, offense usually starts by playing sound defense.

"The stability's huge," Gionta said of his line. "You get a comfort level, you know where guys are. You know how each other plays. You know where your support's going to be. It just takes all the guesswork out of it."

Gionta, who scored 12 times last year after a slow start, hit the 20-goal mark seven straight seasons earlier in his career, the last coming in 2010-11.

Right now, Gionta is on a 21-goal pace.

"How many did you peg him for at the beginning of the year?" Bylsma asked. "I'm not surprised at him being able to get that number of goals with the way his line played ... not only checking, but playing in the offensive zone."

Twenty goals would be a significant achievement. A Sabre Gionta's age hasn't hit that mark since Dave Andreychuk, who was 37 in 2000-01. According to local stat researcher Mike Haim, the oldest 20-goal scorer in franchise history is Don Marshall, who was 38 most of the Sabres' first season in 1970-71.

If Gionta, who's in the final season of a three-year, \$12.75 million contract, finishes strongly, the Sabres would likely re-sign him for a 16th campaign.

Gionta said he thinks about his future "all the time."

"I'm not quite sure what it holds, but I guess the exciting part is you enjoy the ride and when it's over, you change the page and go from there," he said.

Foligno believes Gionta can play at least three more seasons. The Sabres haven't had a 40-year-old since Teppo Numminen in 2008-09.

"I hope he has a lot more years to go," Foligno said. "It's been great playing with him. He simplifies the game for myself and Larsson."

Foligno added: "He's getting better, it seems like."

Kyle Okposo excited to play Islanders

By Joe Yerdon

NHL.com

December 16, 2016

BUFFALO -- If things get a little weird for Buffalo Sabres forward Kyle Okposo when he faces the New York Islanders for the first time Friday (7 p.m. ET; MSG-B, MSG+, NHL.TV), you'll have to excuse him.

Okposo was a key member of the Islanders for nine seasons. But he signed a seven-year contract with the Sabres on July 1, ending his time with the organization that picked him No. 7 in the 2006 NHL Draft.

"It's going to be fun, I'm excited to play these guys," Okposo said Thursday. "I still talk to quite a few of those guys. It's going to be weird playing them, but once we get into the game it's going to be fun."

Okposo had 139 goals and 369 points in 529 games with the Islanders, and helped them advance to the Stanley Cup Playoffs three times in the past four seasons. Facing his old team means he knows a lot about them, but they also have a pretty good scouting report on him.

"I played with a lot of those guys for a long time so they know my tendencies, I know their tendencies, and that part of it is going to be a chess match and it'll be fun," Okposo said. "But I'm looking forward to it and we've got to get a win and try to get two points."

Okposo leads the Sabres in goals (nine) and points (21). He has four goals and seven assists in his past 10 games and was moved to a line with center Jack Eichel for the Sabres' 6-3 win against the Los Angeles Kings on Tuesday.

"I've learned how much of a game-breaker he is," Okposo said of Eichel. "His explosiveness is something that you hear about and you can see it when you play against him. But when you play with him you notice it every game and you can just see he's capable of beating a guy every time."

Okposo's first season with the Sabres has been successful statistically, but they have 28 points, placing them 15th in the Eastern Conference, one point and one spot in the standings ahead of the Islanders.

"It's tough to see them struggle, but on the other side of the ledger I'm over here now and this is what I've got to focus on," Okposo said. "When I talk to those guys I just ask them how they're doing and hopefully their spirits are up. You don't like to see guys go through that, that you battled with and you grew up with. But when we play them it's going to be business as usual and everybody is trying to get two points out there. But you don't like to see those guys struggle or go through tough stretches like they are."

Fortunately for Okposo, teammate Matt Moulson knows what it's like to face the Islanders for the first time after changing teams. Moulson had two goals and an assist as a member of the Minnesota Wild at Nassau Coliseum on March 18, 2014. It was his first game against his old team after Moulson was traded from the Islanders to the Sabres on Oct. 27, 2013 and subsequently traded by the Sabres to the Wild on March 5, 2014.

"I think it's just the initial weirdness, I'll call it, of facing your former team," said Moulson, who signed a five-year contract with the Sabres on July 1, 2014. "It's a little weirder when you go into their building for the first time. I think that kind of initial weirdness, once that goes away, it's just another hockey game."

Okposo will get to deal with that weirdness when the Sabres face the Islanders at Barclays Center in Brooklyn on Dec. 23.

"Very passionate fan base there," Okposo said. "The first couple of guys that went back, [Frans] Nielsen and [Matt] Martin [who also left as free agents], they got video tributes and stuff like that. It is what it is, and it's going to be a special moment for me."

Sabres found success rolling lines against LA

By Jourdon LaBarber

Buffalo Sabres

December 15, 2016

Take a look at the ice times for the Buffalo Sabres from their game against Los Angeles on Tuesday. At first glance, you might think you've read a typo, particularly when you see the minutes listed for Ryan O'Reilly and Rasmus Ristolainen.

O'Reilly, the NHL leader in ice time among forwards, was just third among Sabres forwards at 17:08, placing him behind Jack Eichel (18:11) and Marcus Foligno (17:38). Ristolainen entered the game having played 29-plus minutes in four straight contests, but he only skated 22:04. That was second to Dmitry Kulikov, who skated 23:45.

There are a few factors at play here, primarily the fact that special teams played such a small role in the game. The Sabres only had one power play in the game and the Kings had zero. O'Reilly and Ristolainen typically accrue as much ice time as they do because of their heavy involvement on both the power play and penalty kill.

"Without the special teams - we had one power play and no penalty kills - we really rolled four lines for a big part of that game," Sabres coach Dan Bylsma said. "That's really kind of how we want to play."

Zemgus Girgensons and Nicolas Deslauriers had the smallest amount of ice time, but even they skated 10:46 and 10:59, respectively. The remaining Sabres forwards outside of Eichel, Foligno and O'Reilly all fell within range of 12-17 minutes.

The fact that the Sabres scored six goals and earned the victory in a game in which they were able to roll all four of their lines is a good sign for a forward group that is only a Tyler Ennis away from being full healthy.

"I think we've got a lot of good players on our team," forward Matt Moulson said. "Different players, obviously. Everyone's capable of playing in a pretty high level in the NHL so we can roll them over, I think it gives the team a spark."

Moulson has been playing on multiple lines per game recently, and that trend continued against Los Angeles. He began the night playing with Girgensons and Deslauriers, a line that Bylsma said he thought was responsible for Buffalo's best shifts in the first period. Moulson relocated to a line alongside Eichel and Kyle Okposo in the second period and earned two assists by winning battles low in the offensive zone.

Moulson practiced with Eichel and Okposo again on Thursday.

"I think those two guys are obviously easy to play with," Moulson said. "They're smart, strong on the puck and make plays. You've just got to get them the puck and get open. I think we had a few chances to get goals so I thought we moved it well."

Evander Kane played on Eichel's line in the first and third periods, and it was he who scored on an assist from Eichel at the net front to restore Buffalo's two-goal lead. The goal was Kane's fourth in his last five games.

Whether we see Moulson, Kane or both players take the ice with Eichel when the Sabres host the New York Islanders on Friday night remains to be seen. But if Bylsma is able to roll his lines the way he wants to, every forward will get their chance to contribute.

Defense corps approaching full health

With Zach Bogosian a full participant in practice once again and Taylor Fedun skating with the team for the first time since sustaining an injury on Dec. 5, the Sabres' defense corps is nearing full health for what would be the first time this season. That will leave the team with eight healthy defenseman on the roster, meaning they'll likely

have a decision to make in the near future about who they'll reassign to Rochester in order to whittle that number down to seven.

Fedun and Justin Falk were both recalled from Rochester to fill in at points this season and both have proved to be reliable on the back end while Bogosian, Kulikov and Josh Gorges nursed injuries this season. Fedun said he was disappointed with his own injury, of course, but seemed happy with the way he's played while drawing positives from the Sabres' current predicament by looking at it from a team perspective.

"We'll just stick with that and keep moving forward," Fedun said. "But, I mean, as a team it's great. We've had some key injuries back there so it's definitely positive. It's a good problem to have for us moving forward here."

You can hear more from Falk, Gorges and Bylsma on the team's defense corps below in today's Sabres in :90 with Brian Duff.

Bylsma emphasizes five-game stretch

The Sabres have five games in eight days before their holiday break begins on Dec. 24, starting with their home game against the Islanders on Friday. All five of those games are against Eastern Conference opponents: two against the Islanders, two more against the Carolina Hurricanes and one in Florida against the Panthers. The Islanders trail the Sabres by one point in the standings, while the Sabres trail both the Hurricanes and Panthers by two points.

"After the loss to Washington, we really looked at these six games before the break for us to really bear down and focus here," Bylsma said. "I think that's really why the LA win is a real big win for this group and one we want to keep going here. Yes, you can look at our opponents - Carolina twice and the New York Islanders twice - but it's just a stretch of time in the season where we really have to bear down and try and get some wins here and go on a roll."

Lines at practice

48 William Carrier - 90 Ryan O'Reilly - 23 Sam Reinhart
26 Matt Moulson - 15 Jack Eichel - 21 Kyle Okposo
82 Marcus Foligno - 22 Johan Larsson - 12 Brian Gionta
44 Nicolas Deslauriers - 28 Zemgus Girgensons/27 Derek Grant - 9 Evander Kane

Defensemen: 29 Jake McCabe, 55 Rasmus Ristolainen, 4 Josh Gorges, 77 Dmitry Kulikov, 41 Justin Fall, 6 Cody Franson, 47 Zach Bogosian, 38 Taylor Fedun

40 Robin Lehner
31 Anders Nilsson