



Buffalo Sabres

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Sabres view home-and-home vs. Bruins as pivotal

Associated Press

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BUFFALO, N.Y. -- With a six-point gap in the standings, the Buffalo Sabres are hoping to make up some ground on the Boston Bruins in a home-and-home series over three days.

The Sabres (13-13-8) host the Bruins (18-15-4) at 7 pm. on Thursday before heading to Boston for a matinee game on Saturday at 1 p.m.

After picking up its first regulation win in its past five games on Tuesday against the Detroit Red Wings, the Sabres view the upcoming home-and-home series as a potentially pivotal one.

"You're staring at Boston for a home-and-home and they're within earshot," Sabres head coach Dan Bylsma said, according to the team's website. "You have a chance of sweeping these two games and gaining four points on them and putting yourself right near them, right next to them in the standings."

The Sabres will need to go on a run relatively soon if they want to have a sniff of the postseason this year. Heading into Wednesday night's action, the Sabres were six points behind the Bruins for the third Atlantic Division playoff spot and 10 points out of a wild-card spot.

"We all have to be on the same page for these two games," Sabres forward Marcus Foligno said, according to the team's website. "It's obviously something that we've got to do better at our home rink here is get the fans into it, get our game established early. We really haven't been doing great here at home and that's definitely on us. It's something that we need to take pride in."

Buffalo picked up a 4-3 win over Detroit on Tuesday, giving Bylsma his 300th win as a head coach. Evander Kane scored twice, and the Sabres held back several strong comeback efforts by the Red Wings after jumping out to an early lead.

Robin Lehner made 40 saves in the victory for Buffalo.

The Bruins have lost three of their last four games (1-2-1) and are coming off a 4-3 defeat to the Columbus Blue Jackets on Tuesday night. Boston also lost to Carolina in overtime, 3-2, before the holiday break on Dec. 23.

"We're doing so many good things, but we're shooting ourselves in the foot sometimes," Bruins head coach Claude Julien said, according to the team's website. "We have to be better ourselves. For the most part, we're playing well enough that we should be winning those games. Hopefully we turn that trend around and find ways to win those games."

This will be the only home-and-home series for the Bruins this season. Boston won the first two meetings between the two teams, by scores of 4-0 and 2-1.

Brad Marchand leads the Bruins in scoring with 29 points (10 goals, 19 assists) in 37 games). David Pastrnak is second in scoring with 26 points (19 goals, 7 assists) in 30 games.

Tuukka Rask has stopped 67 of 68 shots this year against Buffalo.

Showdowns with Bruins could make or break Sabres' season

By John Vogl

The Buffalo News

December 28, 2016

Brian Gionta doesn't talk in hyperboles. The Sabres captain has seen enough in his 15 seasons to know that not everything is a make-or-break moment.

So when he admits that Buffalo's back-to-back games against Boston are of the utmost importance, it must be true.

"It's not a must-win, but it's pretty close," Gionta said.

The Sabres host the Bruins on Thursday and visit Boston on Saturday. The third-place Bruins hold the final playoff spot in the Atlantic Division. The seventh-place Sabres are six points back.

By New Year's Day, the Sabres could be within two points or 10 points away. Rejuvenation takes place in one scenario, while ruination comes in the other.

"We're pretty desperate," Gionta said Wednesday in KeyBank Center. "We need to start getting points against teams that are ahead of us. If they're in a playoff spot, we need to make sure they don't gain any more ground on us."

These will be the final two meetings for the longtime rivals, so it is Buffalo's last chance to get points at Boston's expense. It hasn't gone well so far. The Bruins won, 4-0, at home Nov. 7 and earned a 2-1 victory Dec. 3 in Buffalo.

"We know what they're capable of," Sabres forward Zemgus Girgensons said. "We've had a decent amount of games that we left points on the table, so it's time for us to step up and get a winning streak going here."

The Sabres' inability to string victories together is what has gotten them in this mess. Their longest winning streak is three games, and it came from Oct. 29 to Nov. 1. Since then, the Bruins have reeled off three three-game streaks. It's part of an Eastern Conference trend.

Columbus has a 13-game winning streak. Philadelphia won 10 in a row. Pittsburgh won seven. Washington won six. Carolina, New Jersey and the New York Rangers won five. Ottawa and Montreal won four in a row.

The Sabres have been up and down, going 9-10-6 since their winning streak.

"You look at our season, you've probably got to win a shootout, you've probably got to win an overtime game to keep a streak going," coach Dan Bylsma said. "Two shootout victories would mean we win four in a row, not start a four-game winless streak."

"Every team that puts four and five and six together, they win some games going away. They also win in a shootout. They tie a game late and get an overtime victory and continue their streak that way. That's something we haven't been able to do."

The Sabres have gone to overtime 11 times and won just three. That's eight points they've missed.

But with a 4-3 victory Tuesday in Detroit, the Sabres have a chance to get another much-needed three-game winning streak.

"It's significant for us," Bylsma said. "Detroit was big to get the two points and really to get the two and not give them any. Now you're staring at Boston for a home-and-home. They're within earshot."

"You have a chance of sweeping these two games and gaining four points on them and putting yourself right near them, right next to them in the standings."

The Sabres blew their last opportunity to close ground. They went 0-2-2 in the four games before the Christmas break, all of which came against conference rivals.

"It's a huge week for us," Gionta said. "We needed a big week before Christmas, and we didn't have it. It makes this week more important."

Sabres Notebook: Even at home; Franson, Ennis skate

By John Vogl

The Buffalo News

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Home is where the mediocrity is. Buffalo has a last chance to make it a positive place.

The Sabres will play their 38th and final home game of 2016 when Boston visits Thursday. The Sabres are 15-15-7 in KeyBank Center during the calendar year, so a victory will give them a .513 points percentage in 2016.

"We haven't been doing great at home, and that's definitely on us," left wing Marcus Foligno said Wednesday. "It's something we need to take pride in."

The Sabres went 8-8-4 at home during the second half of the 2015-16 season. They are 7-7-3 this season, which ranks 26th in the NHL.

Buffalo has scored 35 goals in the 17 games, an average of 2.06. Only Colorado, with 34 goals in 17 games, is worse at home.

The lack of scoring and dearth of victories have turned the arena into a no-noise zone. The Sabres could change that with a solid start.

After allowing the first goal in seven straight games, Buffalo opened a 2-0 lead during Wednesday's 4-3 victory in Detroit. The Sabres improved to 9-1-5 when scoring first. They are 4-12-3 when allowing the opening goal.

"It's not only just getting the goal," coach Dan Bylsma said. "We scored eight minutes into that game with" Evander Kane's "goal, but we had four really good shifts into the offensive zone, getting momentum for our team right from the drop of the puck.

"That's the momentum we have to build into our game and build it right from the start, use our fans, use our building to gain momentum."

Sabres defenseman Cody Franson, who has missed three games with a lower-body injury, practiced fully and could return to the lineup.

"I'm working back, and it's feeling really good," Franson said. "We're kind of going day-by-day with it right now. I felt good out there, so I'm hopeful."

Franson tweaked a muscle during the morning skate last Thursday. He took part in the pregame warmups but did not come out for the game against Carolina.

"It was just a muscle thing," Franson said. "It's been acting up. I had to take care of it, but it should be good to go."

The Sabres practiced without three key pieces of the lineup – goaltender Robin Lehner and defensemen Jake McCabe and Dmitry Kulikov – but all are expected to be available against the Bruins. Bylsma said they rested for maintenance days, though Lehner visited the doctor for further evaluation of his neck.

The goaltender took a stick to the throat against the Red Wings, and the spear left a long red mark.

"We saw the abrasion," Bylsma said. "He's going to see the doctor more as a formality."

Goaltending coach Andrew Allen served as the second netminder in place of Lehner.

Forward Tyler Ennis, who hasn't played since Nov. 7 because of sports hernia surgery, could start practicing with the Sabres in the next 7-10 days.

"Tyler Ennis continues to skate on his own and progressing," Bylsma said.

Anders Nilsson has a decorative mask again. Though it's temporary, it looks the same as his old one.

A slap shot by Rasmus Ristolainen during practice last week cracked Nilsson's mask, which was painted gold and blue with a portrait of his son and adorned with the rainbow pride flag. The goalie wore a plain white mask Friday against the New York Islanders.

During the Christmas break, equipment manager Dave Williams took the helmet to SkinFX Wraps in Rochester. The company copied the paint job from Nilsson's original mask, applied it to a vinyl sticker, then taped it to the white mask.

Nilsson will use it while another is being painted.

"It's almost a replica on there," Nilsson said. "You can't tell from a distance. You have to get real close, so he does a really good job. I'm thankful that he could do it during Christmas time."

Sabres' Jack Eichel refreshed for second half after short break

By Bill Hoppe
Olean Times Herald
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BUFFALO – Long after Sabres center Jack Eichel leaves the rink, his struggles still weigh heavy in his mind. "I take it home," Eichel said Wednesday after the Sabres prepared for tonight's tilt against the Boston Bruins at KeyBank Center.

So naturally, Eichel's frustration was visible as his career-long five-game pointless streak hit as the Sabres lost four straight contests before their Christmas break.

"You could see it in his body language," Sabres coach Dan Bylsma said. "You could see it in his play ... desperately trying to make plays and make something happen for our team."

The three-day recess came at the perfect time for Eichel, who went home to Massachusetts for the first time since August.

"It was probably good to go home and see my family a little bit, definitely try to get my mind off of it," said Eichel, who scored a goal and two points in Tuesday's 4-3 win. "It's tough to lose sleep over. I think everything in life goes a little bit better when you're playing well and your team's doing well."

Eichel, 20, has already endured what he called a "kind of awkward first half of the year." After playing in the World Cup of Hockey in September, he suffered a high left ankle sprain Oct. 12. He missed the first 21 games, finally returning Nov. 29.

He roared out of the gate, compiling three goals and four points in his first two games. But he only mustered two goals and four points in the next 10 outings, going pointless eight times.

Going home in the midst of one of the weakest stretches of his career allowed Eichel "to hit the reset button," he said.

"You get around people who know you really well and knew you before you became a professional hockey player, it's a bit refreshing," he said.

Eichel looked refreshed Tuesday in Detroit. His goal, the 30th of his 94-game career, will likely become a highlight-reel staple.

After carrying the puck into the zone from center ice, he scorched former Sabres star Thomas Vanek in the left circle, cut to the net on his backhand and switched to his forehand before roofing a shot in.

"It felt good," Eichel said. "I felt like I had played decently well in a couple games before that, with the exception of the Islanders game (Friday, a 5-1 loss). ... I was doing some good things. I was getting opportunities. I just wasn't cashing in."

Thanks to a long Christmas break, Eichel went on a tear as a rookie a year ago, starting with a two-goal, four-point effort Dec. 26, 2015 in Boston, his first NHL appearance in his hometown. He finished with 13 goals and 40 points in his final 48 games.

The Sabres trail the third-place Bruins by six points for the Atlantic Division's final playoff spot. The teams also meet again Saturday afternoon in Boston.

"They're within earshot," Bylsma said. "You have a chance of sweeping these two games and gaining four points on them, putting yourself right near them."

Eichel will almost certainly need to produce a dynamic second half if the Sabres have any hopes of catching their longtime rival. That task could be arduous for Eichel over the next two or three weeks.

With top center Ryan O'Reilly sidelined after undergoing an appendectomy over the weekend, teams can key on Eichel and put their top checkers on him.

"It accents the match-ups (Eichel) gets in the game," Bylsma said of O'Reilly's absence. "We saw it last year."

Last winter, opponents focused on Eichel when a broken foot shelved O'Reilly 11 games. Early on, Eichel struggled against the likes of Ryan Getzlaf, Anze Kopitar and Joe Thornton, some of the Western Conference's heaviest centers.

Eichel then had five goals and seven points in the final six games of O'Reilly's absence.

"It was a good test for me," Eichel said. "I think more than anything you just need to bring it on a shift-to-shift basis similar to (Tuesday) night playing against Henrik Zetterberg.

"You got to be on your toes every shift and ready to compete in all three zones. I think your work away from the puck has to become a lot better. It's something I have to keep working at."

Sabres goalie Robin Lehner OK after stick to neck; Tyler Ennis progressing

By Bill Hoppe

Olean Times Herald

December 28, 2016

BUFFALO – Some quick updates from KeyBank Center, where the Sabres practiced this afternoon following Tuesday's 4-3 win in Detroit:

– Goalie Robin Lehner, who took a stick to the throat against the Red Wings, and defensemen Dmitry Kulikov and Jake McCabe all missed practice with maintenance days, Sabres coach Dan Bylsma said.

Lehner, who has an abrasion on his neck from teammate Zach Bogosian's stick, saw a doctor this morning "as more of a formality," Bylsma said.

– Winger Tyler Ennis, out the last 22 games following groin surgery, has been skating on his own and could join team practices in the next week or 10 days, Bylsma said.

– Defenseman Cody Franson, out the last three games with what he said is a lower-body/muscle injury, practiced today and is hopeful he can play Thursday here against the Boston Bruins.

"I felt good out there today," he said.

Franson said he was injured the morning of last Thursday's 2-1 shootout loss to Carolina.

– The Sabres trail the third-place Bruins by six points in the Atlantic Division. The teams also meet Saturday afternoon in Boston, so the home-and-home set is huge.

"They're within earshot," Bylsma said. "You have a chance of sweeping these two games and gaining four points on them, putting yourself right near them, right next to them in the standings."

Sabres look ahead to important 2-game set with Bruins

By Jourdon LaBarber

Buffalo Sabres

December 28, 2016

There have been a handful of long winning streaks in the NHL during the first half of this season, none of which are more prominent than the one currently being enjoyed by the Columbus Blue Jackets. Columbus extended its streak to 13 games with a 4-3 win over Boston on Tuesday, a game in which captain Nick Foligno scored the winning goal in the third period.

Before the game on Tuesday - back when the Columbus streak was at a mere 12 games - Buffalo Sabres forward Marcus Foligno had a chance to catch up with his older brother during the holiday break. Naturally, the topic of the Blue Jackets' success came up.

"I picked his brain a little bit," Foligno said following practice for the Sabres at KeyBank Center on Wednesday. "They're having fun. Obviously winning is fun and the room's loose there. They're not gripping the sticks there, that's why I think they're scoring so many goals. Things are clicking right now, they're enjoying each other and they're really one as a team.

"Talking to him as a captain, he just said you really just got to erase the game that you just played from the memory and that's what they've been doing for the last 13."

While no team can be expected to win 13 games in a row, a winning streak beyond three games is something that has eluded the Sabres this season and would go a long way in their efforts to make up ground in the Atlantic Division. Thanks to Columbus' win over Boston and Buffalo's win over Detroit on Tuesday, the Sabres now trail the third-place Bruins by six points with three games in hand.

It's hard to imagine a better time to make up that ground than right now. The Sabres and Bruins meet for the final two times this season during an upcoming home-and-home set that begins at KeyBank Center on Thursday night.

"You're staring at Boston for a home-and-home and they're within earshot," Sabres coach Dan Bylsma said. "You have a chance of sweeping these two games and gaining four points on them and putting yourself right near them, right next to them in the standings."

Both Bylsma and Foligno emphasized the importance of a strong start in front of their home crowd on Thursday. After having trailed following the first period in their last six games, Buffalo jumped out to a 2-0 lead in the first 20 minutes of their game in Detroit on Tuesday and carried that momentum to a 4-3 win. Their record when leading after the first period this season is 7-0-3.

"We all have to be on the same page for these two games," Foligno said. "It's obviously something that we've got to do better at our home rink here is get the fans into it, get our game established early. We really haven't been doing great here at home and that's definitely on us. It's something that we need to take pride in."

Other than slow starts, Bylsma said the Sabres' struggles in shootouts are what's separated them from having long winning streaks this season. He pointed to their back-to-back shootout losses on the road against Carolina and Florida as an example. Had the Sabres won those shootouts, they would've been on a four-game winning streak. Instead, with regulation losses in their next two games, those one-point efforts became the beginning of a four-game winless streak.

The current streaks in the NHL back up Bylsma's claim. The Blue Jackets have won two shootouts and another game in overtime during their current streak, while the Minnesota Wild's current 11-game win streak began with back-to-back overtime and shootout victories.

"I think you look at our season, you've probably got to win a shootout. You've probably got to win an overtime game to keep a streak going," Bylsma said. "I think every team that puts four and five and six together, they win

some games going away and also they win in a shootout. They tie a game late, get an overtime victory and continue their streak going that way."

"That's something we haven't been able to do ... We're going to have to probably win some games a couple different ways, a lot of different ways to get going on a streak."

Medical report

Robin Lehner, Dmitry Kulikov and Jake McCabe were all absent from practice on Tuesday for maintenance days, but Bylsma said he expects all three to be ready to play against Boston on Thursday. Lehner's absence was due to a checkup on his throat after Zach Bogosian's stick caught him beneath the mask in Detroit, leaving a noticeable welt.

"He was checked out last night after the game with the stick to the neck and you saw the abrasion," Bylsma said. "He is going to see the doctor this morning just as more of a formality but that's why he wasn't with us this morning."

Cody Franson, who has missed the last three games with what Bylsma referred to as a "middle-body" injury, did return to practice and said he felt good skating. Bylsma said that Franson is a possibility to return to the lineup Thursday.

Meanwhile, Tyler Ennis continues to skate on his own with hopes of returning to practice with the team in the next 7-10 days, Bylsma said. Ennis has missed the last 22 games with a groin injury.

Lines at practice

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

Defensemen: 55 Rasmus Ristolainen, 4 Josh Gorges, 47 Zach Bogosian, 6 Cody Franson, 41 Justin Falk

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