



Buffalo Sabres

Daily Press Clips

March 25, 2017

Sabres' Ristolainen surprised, frustrated by suspension

By John Vogl

The Buffalo News

March 24, 2017

The NHL handed Rasmus Ristolainen a three-game suspension. He didn't expect any punishment.

So, yes, it's a frustrating time for the Buffalo defenseman.

"They are the decision-makers, so I've got to respect the decision they make," Ristolainen said Friday, one day after the league's player safety department delivered its verdict. "I didn't expect anything. Like I said, they make the decisions, and I have to respect that."

In its video, the league said the onus was on Ristolainen to not hit Jake Guentzel because the Pittsburgh forward didn't have the puck. The disciplinarians told Ristolainen the same thing during his hearing.

"Their point was he didn't have the puck, and I need to make sure he has it when I touch him," Ristolainen said in KeyBank Center. "I don't know what I can really do different there because it was a split second, half-second. It's a quick time, and I was skating backward. It's really hard to stop there, and I don't think I can.

"Unfortunately, the play happened and he got injured."

Ristolainen refused to speculate whether he could have stopped had he been skating forward. Either way, he'll miss Saturday's visit by Toronto, Monday's home game against Florida and Tuesday's visit to Columbus. He'll return for Buffalo's final five games.

"It's frustrating at this point in the year, late in the year," Ristolainen said. "You just practice, can't play. You can't do anything. It is what it is. I'll work hard and I will be ready when I get back."

Sabres know Maple Leafs fans are ready to pounce

By John Vogl
The Buffalo News
March 24, 2017

It's been way too long, but the fans in KeyBank Center will finally be part of a late-season playoff push. Alas, it will only be the fans wearing Toronto jerseys.

Oh, the indignity.

The Sabres will probably feel like the road team Saturday night when the surging Maple Leafs invade downtown. Toronto fans have tried to impose their will when the Leafs were bad. Now that the team is firmly in a playoff spot ...

"I'm sure there's going to be a lot of fans coming down the QEW to watch this game," Sabres left wing Marcus Foligno said Friday. "They're pretty excited to have playoff hockey in their reach and have it back. We can expect a lot of white and blue jerseys, but it makes for a fun atmosphere, so we don't care. We'll try to feed off it."

There were other plausible scenarios when the schedule came out. Both teams could be fighting for a playoff spot. The Sabres could be ahead. Neither team could be any good.

But this?

"They're fighting for a playoff spot, and we're not where we want to be," said Buffalo right wing Kyle Okposo, who is expected to return to the lineup after missing 10 games with a rib injury. "We're going to have to take this and try and learn from it. These guys are fighting for every inch. They're going to come out and play hard. We have to try and match their intensity.

"We have to go win a hockey game, and that's the way we have to look at it. I'm really looking forward to the challenge that Toronto is going to present."

It will be a challenge. The Leafs have won three straight to climb into third place in the Atlantic Division. They've got 85 points, six back of first-place Montreal and three ahead of fourth-place Boston with one fewer game played than both.

"Every guy in this room believed we could win and get into the playoffs and do some damage," center Tyler Bozak said in Toronto. "There's certainly a lot of work to do to get there, but we like where we're at."

The Leafs are 2-1 against the Sabres this season, including a 2-1 victory Nov. 3 in Buffalo. The Sabres entered the game 17-1-1 against the Leafs at home.

Rookies Auston Matthews, Mitch Marner and William Nylander didn't care about that.

"We've got a ton of new faces and a new mindset," Bozak said. "We've kind of put all that stuff from the past behind and turned a new page here. It's nice to be part of."

The Leafs' turnaround was still in its nascent stage during their first visit. The Toronto fans barely made their presence known during the Thursday night game.

For this "Hockey Night in Canada" weekend matchup, longtime Sabres are prepared for the worst – or the best – that Leafs fans can bring.

"We love playing Toronto and Montreal, teams that have a strong fan base that come in and scream and yell and create a lot of energy," left wing Tyler Ennis said. "It gets our fans going. It's a nice competition, and those are the best games."

This game could have been so much better if Buffalo hadn't gone 2-8-2 from Feb. 19 through March 16.

"We thought we'd be much closer and fighting for that last spot right now," forward Ryan O'Reilly said. "With Toronto, there's always hype around them. They're one of the most talked-about teams in hockey. It's a rivalry.

"I want to beat them. I don't want to see them in the playoffs."

Oh, they'll be there. Their fans will make that clear Saturday night.

"That would be ideal, both of us fighting for a playoff spot," Foligno said. "Unfortunately, it isn't for us, but we have a chance to play spoilers.

"It's an arena that Toronto's had a tough time to come in here in the past, and we've got to make sure it's the same thing."

Sabres Notebook: Harsh response to Ristolainen suspension; influx of healthy players
By John Vogl
The Buffalo News
March 24, 2017

One day after the NHL delivered its verdict on Rasmus Ristolainen, the Sabres responded with a verdict of their own.

"It's an overreaction," goaltender Robin Lehner said Friday.

Not surprisingly, Buffalo was disappointed and frustrated to see Ristolainen get a three-game suspension for hitting Pittsburgh's Jake Guentzel.

"I didn't expect anything," Ristolainen said in KeyBank Center. "They are the decision-makers, so I've got to respect the decision they make."

The defenseman will miss his first game Saturday when the Toronto Maple Leafs come to town. He'll also sit Monday's home game against Florida and Tuesday's visit to Columbus.

"Three games is a lot," Sabres defenseman Josh Gorges said. "It's a tough decision, and it's tough being those guys that make those decisions. It's never easy."

The league's player safety department determined Ristolainen hit a defenseless player who didn't have the puck. The blue-liner had Guentzel lined up just past the Penguins' blue line Tuesday, but Buffalo's Zemgus Girgensons intercepted the clearing pass.

"If that puck ended up keep coming and didn't get separated, it's a clean hit and we don't even talk about it," Gorges said. "The intentions of the hit were not to be dirty, malicious or hurt anybody."

After Guentzel suffered a concussion, the NHL scheduled a disciplinary hearing with Ristolainen.

"Their point was he didn't have the puck, and I need to make sure he has it when I touch him," Ristolainen said. "I don't know what I can really do different there because it was a split second, half-second. It's a quick time, and I was skating backward. It's really hard to stop there, and I don't think I can."

"Unfortunately, the play happened and he got injured."

Ristolainen can practice with the Sabres, but he won't join them for a game until the New York Islanders come to town April 2.

"When anybody goes out it's always tough to fill holes," Gorges said. "When you talk about losing your No. 1, you can't replace it."

Although Dmitry Kulikov will return from injury and Justin Falk might be back, the Sabres will still need to call up a defenseman from Rochester. Whoever it is won't play 26:42 per night and be fourth on the team in scoring with five goals and 44 points in 74 games.

"That's one you can't replace," coach Dan Bylsma said. "That's what we're going to have to deal with in the next three games."

The Sabres could get back as many as four players against the Maple Leafs. In addition to Kulikov and Falk, forwards Kyle Okposo and William Carrier are expected to return.

Falk is the only one who's not definite.

"He had done well the last couple days, had a conditioning skate yesterday, and practice today was a test for him," Bylsma said. "We'll see how he responded to that, and it's a possibility to see him in our lineup."

The Sabres added a wrinkle during their power-play workouts. The top unit had all forwards: Jack Eichel, Ryan O'Reilly, Evander Kane, Sam Reinhart and Okposo.

"It should be dynamic," said Bylsma.

With the Sabres' streak of no playoffs about to reach six straight years, the "S" word is being bandied about.

Spoiler.

It gives the players and fans something to look forward to during the final eight games, but the word created a look of disgust on Okposo's face.

"No, I'm not a believer in that," he said. "I don't look at that. You're not trying to spoil. You're trying to play well for your own, and you can't really look at where anyone else is. You have to try and get better for your squad."

Sabres' Tyler Ennis worried about future

By Bill Hoppe
Olean Times Herald
March 24, 2017

BUFFALO – The smile, the upbeat personality are still there. Even as Sabres winger Tyler Ennis spoke openly about his trying season Friday, he sounded excited for his fresh opportunity on the top line, like he couldn't wait for tonight's home tilt against the Toronto Maple Leafs to start.

Of course, the affable Ennis, who has zero goals in the last 17 games, still worries about his uncertain future. But to him, it's a terrific mentality for a hockey player to possess.

"What keeps guys in the league for a long time is worrying," Ennis told the Times Herald following practice inside KeyBank Center. "You never want to be comfortable. Guys, great players will say you have to continue to get better or someone's going to pass you by."

A slew of players have bypassed Ennis on the depth chart this season. In less than two years, he morphed from the Sabres' top offensive threat into a fourth-liner. The three-time 20-goal scorer has only four goals and 10 points in 46 games in 2016-17.

Naturally, the meager output and constant losing – the Sabres will miss the playoffs for the sixth straight year – has been difficult for Ennis to handle.

Coming to the rink hasn't been fun some days.

"You got to put things into perspective," Ennis said. "It's a great job and a great life, but when you're not doing well, you're not meeting expectations, you're not winning, it's definitely not fun. It (stinks). We're all competitive."

Injuries – a concussion cost him the final 45 games last season and groin surgery sidelined him 30 contests earlier this campaign – have slowed the longest-tenured Sabre.

"It was hard for me coming back from an injury," Ennis said. "I think on top of it I was rusty coming back from last year not playing a lot. A few things have compounded, I feel like."

Still, the speedy Ennis said he feels better every day and has "been getting his groove back."

"It takes a lot of work to not beat yourself up," he said. "It takes a lot of work to see the silver lining, see the light at the end of the tunnel and see the opportunity at the end of the hole."

Sabres coach Dan Bylsma awarded Ennis a splendid opportunity last week, moving the 27-year-old beside center Ryan O'Reilly. Ennis should play his fourth straight game on the top line tonight. Winger Kyle Okposo, who missed 10 games with a rib injury, will likely join them against the Leafs.

"I get excited out there," Ennis said of skating on the top line. "It's fun playing in the o-zone. You got guys that can pass and score, responsible players and great guys, good friends."

Bylsma has recently seen signs Ennis is "getting his mobility and getting his pop back in his game," he said.

The final eight games might be a tryout of sorts for Ennis, who has two seasons left on his five-year, \$23 million contract. The Sabres will almost certainly expose him in the upcoming expansion draft.

"He's trying to prove what kind of player he is and where he fits in our lineup right now, and I think that's something he's done a little bit better of recently, and going forward, that's his challenge for the next eight games," Bylsma said.

Ennis' minutes have jumped from below 10 some games to about 17. The opportunity has energized him. He ended an 11-game point drought in Monday's 2-1 win in Detroit.

"It's been a big bump," Ennis said of his ice time. "The thing I can say most is it's been fun. Everyone wants to play. It doesn't matter what level you're at, it doesn't matter what league you're in. You want to play, right? ... No one wants to get off the ice. That's why we play hockey."

Ennis just spent some time on the fourth line, "a position I never played in my entire life," he said. The former first-round pick had difficulty adjusting to the role.

"When you don't play much, you always have to stay in games, because once you get on the ice you're playing against the best players in the world," he said. "So if you're not playing for five or 10 minutes, you have to make sure you're still up, you're still ready, still engaged."

Rasmus Ristolainen's suspension surprises Sabres

By Bill Hoppe
Olean Times Herald
March 24, 2017

BUFFALO – Sabres defenseman Rasmus Ristolainen never expected he would be suspended for hitting Pittsburgh rookie Jake Guentzel in the head Tuesday. Coach Dan Bylsma never expected the ban would be so long.

But in the end, the Sabres will be without their No. 1 defenseman and arguably best player for the next three games, starting with tonight's home tilt against the Toronto Maple Leafs.

"I didn't expect anything," Ristolainen said Friday following practice inside KeyBank Center.

Bylsma said: "I didn't think it was going to be three games."

In suspending Ristolainen on Thursday for checking Guentzel, the NHL said the Finn made "substantial head contact" and could've altered his path toward a player ineligible to be hit.

"They are the decision-makers, so I got to respect the decision they made," Ristolainen said.

Ristolainen was given a five-minute major penalty for interference and ejected 8:46 into Tuesday's 3-1 loss to the Penguins when he skated backward into Guentzel, leveling the rookie as he waited for a pass that was intercepted just outside his own blue line.

What did league officials tell Ristolainen during his hearing with the NHL Department of Player Safety earlier Thursday?

"He didn't have the puck," he said. "I have to make sure when I hit he has the puck."

The concussion Guentzel suffered on the hit and Ristolainen's previously clean record in his four-year career also factored in the three-game ban, said Patrick Burke, a director in the Department of Player Safety, in a video explaining the suspension.

Ristolainen said he told officials he was trying to find the puck. He only had a split-second to make a decision after the puck was knocked away from Guentzel's direction.

"I don't know what I can really do different because it was a split-second, half second ... and I was skating backwards and it's really hard to stop there, and I don't think I can," Ristolainen said.

Sabres defenseman Josh Gorges added: "It's split-second decisions. That's all it is, a split-second. If that ended up coming, didn't get separated, didn't get separated, it's a clean hit and we don't even talk about this. But I think the intentions of the hit were not to be dirty, malicious or hurt anybody."

So for the next eight days – Ristolainen is eligible to return April 2 against the New York Islanders – he can only practice.

"It's frustrating this point in the year, late in the year, just practice can't play, can't do anything," Ristolainen said.

Bylsma said: "You're missing a 27-minute-a-night guy who's in every situation for you. That's one you can't replace."

Good teams always seem to get more breaks. It's *very* possible if the Sabres were in the playoff hunt or a perennial contender, Ristolainen's suspension would've been much lighter.

"I definitely think that's part of the process we're in is getting respect in the league with how we are as an organization and how we play," Bylsma said.

That feeling the other side receives more breaks has probably been around forever.

"I'm not so sure it's a real feeling, but it's one you think of, you feel playing Detroit in the 80s," Bylsma said. "Like, 'Oh, they get all the calls' and they get favorable treatment. I think that's one you earn and you get that respect by how you play and how you are on the ice, not by the color of your jersey."

xxx

Bylsma said wingers William Carrier (bone bruise) and (Kyle Okposo (ribs) and defensemen Justin Falk (bone bruise) and Dmitry Kulikov (upper body) should all return tonight.

The Sabres also need to recall a defenseman.

xxx

The Buffalo chapter of the Professional Hockey Writers' Association has nominated Sabres captain Brian Gionta for the Masterton Trophy, an annual award that recognizes "perseverance, sportsmanship and dedication to hockey."

Gionta, 38, has 14 goals and 32 points in 74 games this season and still skates almost 17 minutes a contest.

xxx

The Rochester Americans have signed three players, including goalie Jonas Johansson, the 61st pick by the Sabres in 2014, to amateur tryouts.

The Swede, 21, went 17-18-0 with a 2.26 goals-against average and a .912 save percentage in 37 games with Almtuna IS of HockeyAllsvenskan, a league in Sweden.

Leafs-Sabres a tale of two rebuilds

By Mike Zeisberger

Toronto Sun

March 24, 2017

On the warm Buffalo evening last summer that Auston Matthews was selected first overall by the Maple Leafs in a boo-filled KeyBank Center, a small pocket of Toronto fans sitting in the stands proudly showcased their T-shirts emblazoned with the words "Auston 20:16."

"He's going to be our saviour!" one of them yelled, trying to have his voice heard over the loud jeers of the locals who were anti-anything-Toronto-related.

Truth be told, the loyal sports-loving zealots of Buffalo have plenty of legitimate fodder to despise The Big Smoke when it comes to the world of fun and games.

Not so long ago, rocker Jon Bon Jovi was for a sliver of time part of a group that attempted to buy the Queen City's beloved Bills with the intention of moving the franchise two hours up the QEW. Fortunately, Western New York billionaire Terry Pegula stepped in to purchase the team in 2014, but not without Buffalo sports fans harbouring plenty of bitterness at Toronto and, specifically, Bon Jovi, who was described in a subsequent article in New York Magazine as the "Most Hated Man in Buffalo."

One year later, the Sabres wined and dined free-agent coach Mike Babcock and were so encouraged at their chances to land the former Detroit Red Wings bench boss that preliminary plans were in place to introduce him to Buffalo media.

But a last-minute change of heart left the Sabres as the jilted bride waiting at the altar while Babcock, citing family reasons, opted for Toronto's ground-breaking eight-year, \$50-million offer, one believed to be similar to that tabled by Buffalo.

Then came the coup de grace in 2016, when Matthews was picked by the rival Leafs right on Buffalo soil. For Sabres supporters, this was the deepest cut of all.

For the previous two seasons, Buffalo had finished dead last in the NHL standings, yet each time was stripped of the right to pick first overall in the draft because of a bad bounce of a ping pong ball in the NHL's draft lottery system.

Of note: While second-overall pick Jack Eichel certainly appears to be a star in the making for the Sabres, the fact that the Edmonton Oilers leapfrogged them for the top selection in 2015 cost Buffalo the services of generational player Connor McDavid.

Now here were the Leafs on this memorable evening of June 24, 2016, calling out Matthew's name as the first player taken in a draft — the type of announcement the Sabres so badly had wanted to make the previous two years.

To call Matthews a "saviour" was a bit over the top, but there is no doubt he has met expectations, if not exceeded them. As for his team, it certainly has done that, rocketing into third place in the Atlantic Division and making a strong bid to reach the playoffs for just the second time in 13 years despite many nights of having seven rookies in the lineup.

To that end, on Saturday, exactly 274 days after Matthews became a Maple Leaf, he and his teammates will return to the building in which he was drafted to face a Sabres team that is a whopping 13 points behind Toronto in the Eastern Conference standings.

Call it a Tale of Two Rebuilds.

Slog through the layers of the Matthews hype and the contributions of all the rookies — from fellow former first-rounders Mitch Marner and William Nylander, to Russian free agent Nikita Zaitsev, to Toronto-area natives Zack Hyman and Connor Brown — are evident. Matthews is one goal away from tying Wendel Clark's franchise rookie record for goals (34), while Nylander set a team freshman mark for most consecutive games with a point (10) in Thursday's 4-2 win over New Jersey.

All in all, three first-year players — Matthews (60 points), Marner (57) and Nylander (56) — lead the team in scoring.

And if that comes as a surprise to you, it certainly doesn't for veterans such as Tyler Bozak.

"I think that's what maybe the outside world thought — that maybe we weren't going to be great and it was going to be a young team," Bozak said. "But I know every guy in this room believed we could win and get into the playoffs and do some damage. I mean, there's certainly a lot of work to do to get there. But we like where we're at.

"We knew seeing the young guys at camp that they had the ability to step up and play right away. They've all done a great job and we've all come together as a good team.

"The nice thing is, we've had all our lines contributing and I think that's what we need to win. You obviously don't expect a young first-year guy or second-year guy to step in and do what these guys have done. And they're only going to get better. It's exciting times around here."

The reverse is true in Buffalo, where various reports of a disconnect between coach Dan Bylsma and his players have surfaced. While Babcock is starting to get mentioned as a potential coach of the year candidate, Bylsma has three more seasons left on his five-year deal, while GM Tim Murray was inked to a multi-year extension on the eve of the Sabres' season opener.

With 50 points in 53 games, Eichel has been outstanding, while Sam Reinhart continues to improve. Secondary scoring, however, remains an issue. While both teams have allowed 214 goals, the Sabres have scored 42 fewer times than the Leafs.

As for some of the Sabres' prospects, Buffalo News columnist Mike Harrington wondered after a 4-3 loss to the Leafs on Jan. 17 just when the likes of Justin Bailey, Nick Baptiste and Hudson Fasching would start significantly chipping in to Buffalo's efforts. While injuries have played a role, those three have combined for just five goals for the Sabres this season.

Still, maybe the chasm between the two teams isn't as wide as you might think. On Feb. 18, the Sabres were just one point behind the Leafs. In the five subsequent weeks, Toronto widened the gap by 12 more.

"We thought we'd be much closer and fighting for that last (playoff) spot right now, especially when we were coming out of the break," Sabres forward Ryan O'Reilly said on Friday.

"With Toronto, there's always hype around them. They're one of the most talked-about teams in hockey. It's a rivalry."

Then O'Reilly delivered a sentiment that likely echoed that of Sabres fans everywhere.

"I want to beat them," O'Reilly said of the Leafs, who defeated Buffalo 2-1 on Nov. 3 in their only previous meeting at KeyBank Center this season.

"I don't want to see them in the playoffs."

With two home games still remaining against Toronto, here's Buffalo's chance to help keep that from happening.

SABRES' TOP D-MAN SITS

It's the type of tradeoff the Maple Leafs will gladly take.

Sure, being without the suspended Roman Polak for Saturday's game against the Sabres in Buffalo will strip Mike Babcock's team of a physical blue line presence in a building where the Leafs historically haven't had much success.

At the same time, the Sabres will be missing a defenceman, too — arguably their best one. Rasmus Ristolainen, who is tied for third in team scoring with 44 points, will begin serving his three game suspension for an incident involving the Penguins' Jake Guentzel earlier this week.

Ristolainen was told by league officials that Guentzel did not have the puck when the Sabres defenceman hit him.

"I don't know what I can really do different there because it was a split-second, half-second," Ristolainen told reporters in Buffalo on Friday. "It's a quick time and I was skating backward.

"It's really hard to stop there and I don't think I can. Unfortunately the play happened and he got injured."

While Ristolainen won't be available, the Sabres are expected to welcome back defenceman Dmitry Kulikov and forwards Kyle Okposo and William Carrier from injury.

A NEW MINDSET

Wins in Buffalo have been as scarce as Maple Leaf playoff appearances over the years.

With an all-time record of 28-70-6 (.298 winning %) in the Queen City, Memorial Auditorium and KeyBank Center have been houses of horror for Toronto teams dating back to 1970.

But this 2016-17 version of the Leafs isn't buying it. For a team full of young kids, Toronto's 2-1 win in Buffalo on Nov. 3 opened what they hope is a new chapter in the Golden Horseshoe rivalry.

"We've got a ton of new faces and a new mindset," veteran Tyler Bozak said when asked about playing in Buffalo. "There's a new group in here. We've kind of put all that stuff from the past behind and turned a new page here.

"It's nice to be part of."

Lehner on Ristolainen suspension: Certain teams get benefit of doubt

By Daniel Goffenberg

Sportsnet

March 24, 2017

Buffalo Sabres goaltender Robin Lehner wasn't impressed with the three-game suspension handed down to teammate Rasmus Ristolainen, and he let his feelings known.

The 27-year-old was speaking to WKBW Buffalo on Friday, when he suggested that the league wouldn't have come down so hard on Ristolainen had he been playing for the Pittsburgh Penguins.

"Certain teams in this league get the benefit of the doubt and that's just it," said Lehner. "If the jerseys were reversed I don't think we're standing here talking three games."

Ristolainen was ejected for a hit on Penguins forward Jake Guentzel on Tuesday. The puck was headed towards Guentzel but got intercepted, making Ristolainen's contact interference.

The Finnish blueliner admitted on Thursday that his ejection was "probably the right call" but seemed surprised on Friday with the severity of his punishment.

"I didn't expect anything so like I said, they make the decisions and I have to respect that," said Ristolainen.

Lehner's suggestion that the league goes easy on Pittsburgh comes at an interesting time.

The NHL is already taking some heat for a likely decision not to hand out any supplemental discipline to Penguins captain Sidney Crosby, who mangled the pinky finger of Ottawa defenceman Marc Methot with a slash on Thursday.

Crosby got away with some stickwork on Ryan O'Reilly in Tuesday's Sabres-Penguins game as well.

"There were other things that happened during that game that should have maybe been under review too, and it just doesn't happen," said Lehner.

The Sabres aren't happy with Ristolainen's suspension

By Paul Hamilton

WGR 550

March 24, 2017

Buffalo, NY (WGR 550) - Rasmus Ristolainen and his teammates were not happy with the length of his suspension from the NHL, but Robin Lehner spoke the loudest. He said of course he was surprised at the severity of the suspension, "Yes, I was. I think it's an overreaction. I don't like to see people injured, especially dealing with a concussion. Obviously we've got to be careful out there, but there's such a small margin for error there."

"If Girgensons doesn't get his stick on it, then he will have the puck and three games after a couple of other suspensions? I think it's a little bit odd."

Ristolainen got three games for his hit on the Penguins Jake Guentzel and Lehner thinks there are different rules for different teams, "It's all because a tip of a stick (Girgensons), a fluke. People might not agree with me and that's fine, but reverse jerseys and it's not three games and everyone around the league or a lot of people would agree with me."

Ristolainen is one of the young guys that cares about this team and takes losing hard. Lehner said, "I just feel for him. He's one of the more passionate guys I've played with, he really wants to help this team, he wants to play as much as he can, he wants to be a guy who helps turn this around and get better with the team."

"I've been playing with Risto for two years and he's a pretty honest player. He had no history, he doesn't jump, he doesn't hit his head, it's a broken play that he reads and he gets three games. There were other things that happened during that game that should've been a review too, but it just doesn't happen, but certain teams in this league get the benefit of the doubt."

"It happens, a high stick, it's an accident and you go to the box. It's very unfortunate and I hope for the best for that guy, so you have to serve your time and we did kill a 5 minute penalty and he didn't play for the rest of the game, so I think we served that penalty and three games more I think is a little bit harsh."

Dan Bylsma has been both a player and a coach in this league and he said when you're on the other side, you always think something is up, "I definitely think that's part of the process we're in, getting respect in the league with how we are as an organization and how we play. I will tell you going back as a player, there is a feeling like the Detroit's back in the 80's and whoever it might be in the 90's, that's a feeling that I'm not so sure is a real feeling, but it's one you feel playing Detroit in the 80's like, they get all the calls and get favorable treatment, but you get that respect with how you are on the ice, not the color of your jersey."

"Over the last 30 years of my career, it didn't matter where I was at, you feel like the people on the other side are getting more calls and are treated differently."

As far as his opinion on the suspension Bylsma said, "I didn't think it was going to be three games. I understand why they reviewed it and we have to accept the three game suspension."

What about Ristolainen himself? He of course is down about not being able to play for three games and he said, "It is what it is, they are the decision makers, so I've got to respect the decision they make." Ristolainen added, "I didn't expect it to be so long."

"I don't know what I really could do different because it was a split second and I was skating backwards, so it's really hard to stop there and I don't think I can, but unfortunately the play happened and he got injured."

Brian Gionta also didn't agree with it, "He's stepping up on a play, the puck just never gets there, you see he kind of holds up on it too, he didn't finish through on it, so that's why the length was surprising."

Josh Gorges also didn't think it would be three games and was surprised, "Yes, a little bit, three games is a lot. It's a tough decision, but it's a split second decision and that's all it is. If that puck ended up keep coming and it didn't get separated, it's a clean hit and we don't even talk about it, so the intentions of the hit was not to be dirty or malicious or hurt anybody, so I was surprised it went to three."

The team wants Ristolainen to be aggressive and he's at his best when he is. He's only 22-years old so you wonder if this can have a lasting effect on how the kid plays. Justin Falk said he's spoken to Ristolainen about it, "I was in the gym there after and we chatted a little bit as he got off the ice and he's an aggressive player, he goes out there and plays physical, plays hard every shift, so I think he'll be fine."

"It was just an unfortunate circumstance and he understands that, so it shouldn't change anything with him."

Falk practiced on Friday and he said if he's asked to play on Saturday, he's ready to go. Bylsma confirmed that Kyle Okposo, Will Carrier and Dmitry Kulikov are all ready to play.

The Sabres will need to call up a defenseman from Rochester.

Lehner on Ristolainen suspension: "If they reverse jerseys I don't think it's three games"

By Matt Bove

WKBW

March 24, 2017

BUFFALO, N.Y. (WKBW) - Buffalo Sabres goaltender Robin Lehner didn't mince any words when asked about his teammate Rasmus Ristolainen and the three-game suspension he was dealt on Thursday.

"People might not agree with me and that's fine but reverse jerseys and it's not three games," Lehner said after practice Friday morning. "Everyone, maybe not officially, but around the league, a lot of people would agree with me."

Lehner, of course, is referring to Ristolainen's hit on Pittsburgh Penguins forward Jake Guentzel in the first period of Tuesday's game. Guentzel left with a concussion and Ristolainen was given a five-minute penalty and game misconduct.

"I don't like to see people injured, you know, especially dealing with a concussion," Lehner added. "Three games after a couple other suspensions that have been [handed out] is just a little bit odd. I don't think if they reverse jerseys I don't think it's three games."

After practice, Ristolainen said that he wasn't expecting to be suspended so he too was surprised by the length of the punishment.

"I didn't expect anything so like I said, they make the decisions and I have to respect that."

Ristolainen is eligible to return against the New York Islanders on April 2. Saturday's game against the Maple Leafs will be the first game he's missed this season.

"There were other things that happened during that game that should've maybe been reviewed too," Lehner said. "It just doesn't happen. Certain teams in this league get the benefit of the doubt. If the jerseys were reversed I don't think we'd be standing here talking three games."

Sabres react to Ristolainen's suspension

By Jourdon LaBarber

Buffalo Sabres

March 24, 2017

For the first time in nearly two full years, the Buffalo Sabres will take the ice for a game without Rasmus Ristolainen in their lineup when they host the Toronto Maple Leafs on Saturday night. After that, they'll do it twice more.

Ristolainen was suspended three games on Thursday for his hit against Pittsburgh Penguins forward Jake Guentzel, a decision that left many of Ristolainen's teammates surprised following practice on Friday.

"A little bit, I mean, three games is a lot," alternate captain Josh Gorges, who was Ristolainen's defensive partner at the time of the hit, said. "It's a tough decision and it's tough being those guys making those decisions. It's never easy ... It's a split-second decision and that's all it is, a split second."

Just before Ristolainen delivered the hit in open ice, the Penguins had attempted a breakout pass to Guentzel in the neutral zone. Ristolainen anticipated that the pass would find its way to the Penguins forward, but it was broken up by Sabres forward Zemgus Girgensons.

As a result, Ristolainen - drifting backward - hit Guentzel in spite of him not having the puck. Ristolainen received a five-minute major for interference and a game misconduct; Guentzel left the game and was diagnosed with a concussion.

"If that puck ended up keeping coming and didn't get separated, it's a clean hit and we don't even talk about it so I think the intentions of the hit we're not to be dirty, malicious, or hurt anybody," Gorges said. "The instances and how it played out, yeah the puck never made it and Risto's got to be aware and [Guentzel is] an unsuspecting player that doesn't touch the puck, I understand all these things. But yeah, I was surprised that it went to three [games]."

Ristolainen said he went into his telephone hearing on Thursday afternoon without any expectations and accepted the League's decision. This is the first suspension of his NHL career.

"Like everyone would say, he didn't have the puck so I have to make sure when I hit, that he has the puck," he said. "You can't hit the guy without the puck."

In a video explanation of the suspension (above), the Department of Player Safety argued that Ristolainen would have had time to avoid making the hit once the play was broken up had he been skating forward instead of backward. Ristolainen chose not to speculate in that regard, but did say that he felt there was little he could change about the play.

"I don't know what I could really do different there because it was a split second, half second," he said. "It's a quick time and I was skating backwards so it's really hard to stop there and I don't think I can. Unfortunately, the play happened and he got injured."

Robin Lehner, meanwhile, had no problem offering his opinion on the play.

"I feel for him," he said. "He's one of the more passionate guys that I've played with, he really wants to help this team. He want to play as much as he can. He wants to be a guy who turns this around and gets better with the team."

"... It's three games away from the team, there's a lot of money he gives up and, as I said, it's all because of the tip of a stick. People might not agree with me, and that's fine, but reverse jerseys and it's not three games. Everyone - maybe not officially - but around the League, a lot of people would agree with me."

Sabres coach Dan Bylsma agreed that there always tends to be a feeling - whether it's true or not - that the top teams get the breaks. But he also had the experience of coaching the Penguins for six seasons when they were among the League's best, and said it felt no different on that side of the coin.

"Over the last 30 years of my career, it didn't matter where I was at or if I was a player or a coach, you feel like the people on the other side are getting more calls and are treated differently," he said.

Ristolainen hasn't missed a game since April 1, 2015 - which, coincidentally, was also against the Maple Leafs. He's averaged 26:42 of ice time this season, the fifth-highest mark in the NHL. His absence will be felt not only on defense, but on the power play (Buffalo went with five forwards on the top unit in his absence) and the penalty kill as well.

"You're missing a 27-minute a night guy who's in every situation for you," Bylsma said. "That's one you can't replace. So that's what we're going to have to deal with in the next three games and our guys will go forward doing that."

Excluding Ristolainen, the Sabres had five defensemen at practice. Justin Falk returned for the first time since sustaining a calf injury in San Jose last week and said he hopes to play Saturday, which Bylsma said is a possibility assuming Falk responds well to practicing.

Cody Franson and Taylor Fedun are still out due to injuries, meaning the Sabres will have to recall a sixth defenseman to replace Ristolainen in the lineup.

As for how the decision will affect Ristolainen's game, his fellow defensemen said they wouldn't expect it to take away from the aggressiveness that's defined him during his four NHL seasons.

"I hope not," Gorges said. "I hope that he keeps playing on the edge ... That's what makes him such an all-around good player, is he's not one-dimensional. He can play a skilled game but he's a big body that likes to play a physical game and doesn't mind when guys come and finish checks on him. He embraces that part of the game."

"I hope that doesn't change in him and I really don't think it will."

Friday's practice

63 Tyler Ennis - 90 Ryan O'Reilly - 21 Kyle Okposo
82 Marcus Foligno - 15 Jack Eichel - 23 Sam Reinhart
9 Evander Kane - 71 Evan Rodrigues - 12 Brian Gionta
48 William Carrier - 28 Zemgus Girgensons - 26 Matt Moulson
44 Nicolas Deslauriers - 52 Hudson Fasching

4 Josh Gorges - 41 Justin Falk
77 Dmitry Kulikov - 55 Rasmus Ristolainen
29 Jake McCabe - 47 Zach Bogosian

40 Robin Lehner
31 Anders Nilsson

Power play

First unit: Eichel, O'Reilly, Okposo, Kane, Reinhart

Second unit: McCabe/Bogosian, Ennis, Gionta, Rodrigues, Moulson