



Buffalo Sabres

Daily Press Clips

March 27, 2017

Giant milestone, celebration await Sabres' Gionta

By John Vogl
The Buffalo News
March 26, 2017

Steve Bartlett, like many Rochester hockey people, was looking forward to the game. Two kids with a real shot to make the NHL were about to take the ice.

On the other team was Brian Gionta. Talented player, people said, but too small to go anywhere.

After two periods, the team with the prospects was up, 5-1.

"Third period came, and Brian just completely took control of that game," Bartlett recalled Sunday. "They ended up winning, 6-5. It was one of the most amazing performances I'd seen against a team that had the so-called big horses.

"I came out of there thinking, 'I don't care what anybody says. This guy is going to be in the National Hockey League.'"

It's been 23 years since that youth game. Gionta not only made the National Hockey League, he's still playing. The 38-year-old who's always been too small will hit a giant milestone Monday.

Gionta will skate in his 1,000th game when the Sabres host the Florida Panthers. After a pregame ceremony in KeyBank Center, Buffalo's captain will become the 312th player and 43rd American to reach the magic number.

"Obviously, it's a pretty cool milestone to have reached," Gionta said in HarborCenter. "I'm fortunate that some people believed in me back in the day."

Bartlett, Gionta's longtime agent, is on that list of believers. So is Lou Lamoriello, the general manager who drafted him in New Jersey. Not many others can make that claim.

Skaters who are 5-foot-7 simply didn't succeed in the hockey world during the early 2000s.

"He's come up and beat the odds in so many ways," Bartlett said by phone. "He's gone from somebody they said couldn't play to someone that everyone admires in not only what he's accomplished but how he's done it. He's stayed so grounded and appreciates every day the success that he's had.

"He's never been a guy that's taken it for granted."

Coaches and teammates have admired Gionta's skills, determination, work ethic and leadership throughout his 15-year career. But the word that accompanies him most is respect.

"He treats other people with respect, and in turn he gains a lot of respect from everyone else around him," said Sabres defenseman Josh Gorges, a close friend and longtime teammate. "You just watch how he prepares, how he commits to excellence, the mental side of the game, the physical side of the game. I'm sure everyone told him from the time he was 10 years old, 'You're too small to play hockey. You're too small. You'll never make it. You'll never make it.' Not only did he make it, he's succeeded beyond expectations.

"If you can't look up to somebody like that, you've got to give your head a shake."

Gionta's commitment to fitness and his ability to reinvent himself are keys to the longevity. He's still a chiseled 178 pounds, which allows him to handle his forechecking and defensive assignments.

"It's finding a role on each team that you're on," he said. "It's gone from being a checking-line forward when I first came in to being looked at as a scoring guy, a go-to guy, and then it comes back around to maybe not being relied upon to score as many goals but be there as a good teammate, a good penalty-killer, as a good checking-line guy."

During his three seasons with Buffalo, Gionta has been at his best as a third-line checker. But he still shows the offensive skills that made him a 48-goal scorer in 2005-06. He's sixth on the Sabres in goals (14) and seventh in points (32).

Gionta has reached double digits in goals during 13 of his 15 seasons. He was limited to 33 and 31 games the only times he didn't.

"I remember the year in Jersey when he scored 48," Sabres right wing Kyle Okposo said. "If you score 48 goals in this league in one year, you're a damn good player. That's no small feat."

"To play for as long as he has, as consistently as he has, that says a lot."

Gionta has 288 goals, 297 assists and 595 points during his 999 games. He's added 32 goals, 36 assists and 68 points in 112 playoff games, which includes a Stanley Cup with the Devils in 2003. The third-round pick in 1998 is ninth in his draft class in points and 12th in games played.

But it's not numbers that define the Rochester native.

"He's a class act, a guy that I think we all look up to," Sabres center Ryan O'Reilly said. "He's won a Cup. It's the way he takes care of himself, the little things he says. It's inspirational watching him."

"Every night you know what you're getting from him. You know he's going to work. You know he's going to do the little plays, win that battle. Especially for his size, too, what he's done, that's not easy."

As Gionta reaches the milestone, he fondly remembers his debut Dec. 30, 2001, in Edmonton ("I couldn't believe the pace of play, how fast the game was, how fast things happen out there") and his first goal four days later ("Against Nashville, Tomas Vokoun. Longtime friend, longtime teammate, longtime linemate Scott Gomez set me up for it").

He also remembers his parents allowing him to play for youth teams in Buffalo and Syracuse despite the wintry drives. He remembers Lamoriello believing in him and giving him a shot. He remembers the good times as captain in hockey-crazy Montreal, and he feels pride in being the captain in Buffalo after cheering for the Sabres as a kid.

He also remembers watching the Canadiens honor Hal Gill for playing his 1,000th game in 2011.

"I was great buddies with him, and at the time I thought, 'Holy crap, that guy's old,'" Gionta said. "Now it's coming full circle back on me now. You go from being the young guy to all of a sudden being the old guy on the team. It's a quick transition between those two."

"I've just enjoyed every day coming to the rink and being able to do something I love to do. I still love the game. I still have fun coming to the rink, so hopefully it can continue on."

Gionta has made it clear this won't be his final season despite an expiring contract. There's no telling how many games he'll play, but there will be a celebration for No. 1,000.

"It's a special night for him," O'Reilly said, "but he's a special guy."

Sabres Notebook: Surprise party for Kulikov; Panthers roll

By John Vogl

The Buffalo News

March 26, 2017

Dmitry Kulikov knew his 500th game was coming. He just didn't think it was Saturday.

"I thought I was 10, 15 away from 500," Kulikov said. "It was a good surprise and a good 500."

Forget good. Compared to the rest of the season, it was an incredible, fantastic, extraordinary 500.

After an injury-plagued season that featured just one goal and one assist in 39 games, Kulikov finally got a chance to have fun against Toronto. The defenseman doubled his season output, recording a goal and assist during the 5-2 victory over the Maple Leafs.

It was an impressive return after missing nine games with a concussion.

"I was just trying to take advantage of the opportunity I've got in the last eight games," Kulikov said. "It's fun to play when things are going your way and when the team is winning. I had a lot of fun."

With Rasmus Ristolainen serving the first of his three-game suspension, Kulikov joined Jake McCabe as Buffalo's top defense pair. He skated 23:55, including 2:40 short-handed and 1:09 on the power play. Both of his points came during the man-advantage.

"It was big task," Sabres coach Dan Bylsma said. "Without Risto in the lineup, he was top pairing, playing against their good players. He stepped into the power play, and it was seamless."

Kulikov's ability to move the puck from the point altered Bylsma's power-play plans. The Sabres had practiced with five forwards on the first unit (Jack Eichel, Ryan O'Reilly, Kyle Okposo, Evander Kane and Sam Reinhart), but Bylsma opted for Kulikov instead of Kane.

It worked as Buffalo went 2 for 2 to improve to an NHL-best 24.5 percent.

"We had both options we were thinking about using," Bylsma said. "We practiced the one, obviously, to get comfortable with the five forwards."

Kulikov will be an unrestricted free agent this summer. After suffering a preseason back injury that lingered for months and the concussion, he has a chance to head into the offseason strong.

"Dmitry's looked really good coming back from his injury," Bylsma said. "He's skating well. The last two days of practice had been his most aggressive, most physical and the way he can play. I thought he stepped right into the game and showed that for us."

While the Sabres had plenty of reasons to feel good Saturday, the Florida Panthers had even more. They'll head into Monday's game in Buffalo fresh off a 7-0 shellacking of the Chicago Blackhawks.

"We talked about this kind of being a big game for us to kind of judge where we are and what we can do," Florida coach Tom Rowe said.

Still, the Panthers are limping into Buffalo. Jaromir Jagr left the victory with a lower-body injury, while defenseman Aaron Ekblad missed his second straight with a neck ailment.

Neither team will make the playoffs, but both are hoping Saturday's wins will propel them to a solid finish.

"I certainly believe that and hope that," Bylsma said Sunday in HarborCenter. "That was a good example of how we can play and how we need to play."

Sabres, Bills still waiting for lifeboats

By Bucky Gleason

The Buffalo News

March 26, 2017

The Sabres came up for oxygen over the weekend in their 5-2 victory over the Maple Leafs, a gasp before they sink beneath the surface and drown in another lost regular season. Math soon will officially confirm what has long been obvious, that the playoffs are out of reach yet again.

Buffalo teams have missed the postseason 12 consecutive times since the Pegulas' first full season of owning the Sabres, who are on a six-year run of futility. Since the Bills began their 17-year playoff drought, it will mark 28 times in 34 sports seasons in which Buffalo teams failed to reach the postseason.

The Bills haven't won a playoff game since the 1995 season. The Sabres haven't won a playoff series in a decade.

Nobody should blame Terry and Kim Pegula for that much misery, but nobody should absolve them, either. They contributed their share after purchasing the Sabres and later assuming command over the Bills. They inherited problems with both teams, added more layers and offered few solutions.

Buffalo fans are left in an internal wrestling match, a conflict between civic appreciation and competitive disappointment. Do they thank the Pegulas for purchasing the Bills and Sabres or condemn them for their roles in both teams becoming perennial losers? At what point does the honeymoon end?

Six years ago, Terry Pegula stood teary-eyed behind a microphone and suggested the Sabres would win a Stanley Cup within three years. You remember. "Starting today," he said, "the Buffalo Sabres' reason for existence will be to win a Stanley Cup." Three years later, they had the worst season in franchise history.

Let's not forget employing the genius idea of losing on purpose – tanking – as a strategy for winning. If you listened to supporters of that asinine approach, and Pegula clearly was one of them, their problems would be solved. They spent two years losing and banking on the quick fix.

Two years later, the Sabres remain broken.

Never short on irrational reasons for failure, and hesitant to acknowledge they were duped by people they trusted with their money, apologetic Sabres fans emerged with predictable excuses: new ownership, youth, injuries, bad coaching. Only the owners aren't new anymore, the Sabres have plenty of experience and a qualified coach. Blaming injuries is admitting a lack of depth.

The reality is that the Pegulas began steering the Sabres toward the abyss from the moment they took the wheel. Their first mistake, waiting too long to make changes at the top, had far-reaching effects that continue to make an impact. Looking back, it's incredible that a diehard Sabres fan like him ignored the obvious.

Supposedly, this was the year in which the Sabres made a run for the playoffs. Instead, they've been running around in circles. They drew within two points of third place in the Atlantic Division with a 26-23-10 record, marking the first time they were three games above .500 in five years, before a dreadful 4-9-2 stretch.

The Sabres are 31-32-12 this season, on pace for 81 points or the same number they had last season. And that's with the NHL's top power play. The Sabres would be on pace for 83 points in games played with Jack Eichel, who missed 21 contests. He has been terrific, but one player doesn't make a monumental difference in hockey.

Again, he's not a quarterback, and this isn't the NBA.

We could continue arguing over the merits of their approach, but certainly most would agree the tank lost traction and stalled. The Sabres wouldn't be much better with Connor McDavid, either. The Sabres needed Eichel and McDavid, plus other high-end players supporting them, to become a playoff team.

Fans were warned about the dangers of tanking, which was unfair to Eichel more than anyone else. The Sabres' owners were among many who bought into the myth. OK, they're better than they were two years ago. But if 10-12 points from the playoffs somehow passes for achievement, after they couldn't get any worse, heaven help us all.

Exceeding minimal standards and convincing others it equates to progress is another old trick. I figured fans were too smart to fall for that scam, but I was sadly mistaken. Desperate many are still lapping up the notion that all is well, that better days are just around the corner, that they will be vindicated.

Here's the deal: The Sabres are four or five, maybe six, upgrades away from being a perennial playoff contender. They're three top-six forwards and three top-four defensemen from becoming a championship contender. To suggest otherwise is buying false hope and giving Tim Murray too much credit.

This was a year in which the Sabres were expected to win more and challenge for the playoffs. That's what they sold after making a big jump last season, and that's what fans bought going into this year. Instead, they're on the verge of extending their longest playoff drought in history.

Someday, the Sabres will reach the playoffs again. In a league in which more than half the teams qualify for postseason play, it's bound to happen at some point. When it does, I wonder how many people will look back and argue that the five years (or more) needed to regain respectability was worth the unnecessary hassle.

Buffalo's winning percentage this season is fifth-worst since the NHL implemented an 82-game schedule in 1995-96. The other four seasons included two years in which the Sabres were tanking; the last year at Memorial Auditorium, a beloved team short on talent and long on effort that won the division a year later; and another season, 2002-03, in which the franchise was in turmoil and headed for bankruptcy while its owners were headed for prison.

This is the fourth year without the postseason since the Sabres decided to tear down the franchise, pacifying fans with a so-called plan while telling top-end free agents to look elsewhere if winning was their goal. It led to overpaid players and questionable trades, some lopsided, and limited the chance for drastic improvement.

Murray has accomplished nothing other general managers couldn't under the same circumstances. He assembled a roster with the intention of losing, drafted two players second overall, overpaid for trades, ran up payroll and made marginal improvement. He drained his cache of draft picks and has limited prospects in Rochester. He's been credited for growth mostly because he started from the bottom.

Doug Whaley is a failure who has been stripped of his power and, apparently, his voice. He has been around longer, and his teams have fallen short more often, but Murray hasn't exactly inspired confidence, either. The Sabres aren't much different than the Bills in that regard while drowning in mediocrity.

Both teams are treading water, gasping for oxygen, waiting for someone to come to the rescue with nobody in sight.

1,000-game milestone special for Sabres captain Brian Gionta

By Bill Hoppe
Olean Times Herald
March 26, 2017

BUFFALO – Over his 15 NHL seasons, Sabres captain Brian Gionta has seen plenty of players hit the prestigious 1,000-game mark, one of hockey's toughest milestones.

But one time still stands out vividly.

As a member of the Montreal Canadiens, Gionta's teammate, defenseman Hal Gill, played his 1,000th game early in 2011-12. Apparently, Gionta, then a 32-year-old in his 10th season, thought his friend was ancient.

"At the time, I thought, 'Holy crap, that guy's old,'" Gionta recalled Sunday inside HarborCenter. "It's coming full circle back on me now."

Yes, by hockey standards, Gionta is old. Tonight's tilt against the Florida Panthers at KeyBank Center will be his 1,000th NHL appearance.

How old is Gionta? The Greece native made his NHL debut in the New Jersey Devils' 2-1 road win against the Edmonton Oilers on Dec. 30, 2001. That was 5,566 days ago. Gionta's teammate Jack Eichel was only 5 years old then.

"It's one of the biggest accomplishments you can have in the game is be called an old guy," Sabres coach Dan Bylsma said. "I have similar feelings of guys who played a long time in the league and played a lot of games. You just don't know how it's possible to play that many hockey games."

Gionta's unlikely career is filled with big accomplishments. The 38-year-old winger won the Stanley Cup with New Jersey in 2003. He has also captained two franchises, scored 48 goals in a season and represented Team USA at the Olympics.

Remember, Gionta, who's listed at 5-foot-7, is one of the NHL smallest players.

"He was able to do what not very many guys have been able to do with his stature, get in the game and play," Bylsma said.

Sabres defenseman Josh Gorges said Gionta was probably told growing up he would never make it.

"Not only did he make it, he succeeded beyond expectations," Gorges said. "If you can't look up to somebody like that, you've got to give your head a shake."

Gionta earned an opportunity, in part, because former New Jersey general manager Lou Lamoriello drafted him 82nd overall in 1998, after he had just completed the first season in what would become a dynamic four-year NCAA career at Boston College.

"I'm just fortunate some people believed in me back in the day," Gionta said. "(I'm grateful to) the Devils for giving me a chance to break into the league. I would've never thought it would've lasted this long."

These days, Gionta is still a durable, productive player. He has played all 75 games this season, compiling 14 goals and 32 points.

"He's still at 38 playing like a young man," Bylsma said.

But the Sabres, who are struggling to emerge following a long rebuild, wanted Gionta for more than that. They signed him to a three-year contract in 2014 because he could also mentor their young players.

"You want to know how to be a professional, you want to know how to work, you want to know how to do it right?" Bylsma said. "Just look at Brian Gionta, and that's what I hope our young players look at and learn from and take to their own games."

Those qualities helped the Buffalo chapter of the Professional Hockey Writers' Association nominate Gionta this month for the Masterton Trophy, an annual award that recognizes "perseverance, sportsmanship and dedication to hockey."

Gionta's ability to evolve has helped him last so long through different eras. He morphed from a checker as youngster into a scorer before settling back into a checking role as a veteran.

"It's finding a way, finding a role on each team you're on," Gionta said.

Gionta entered the NHL in a much different era. Bylsma said it was a "sludgier game" then. The league wasn't kind to undersized players, even if they possessed skill. It was a big man's game in the early 2000s.

"A lot was different," Gionta said. "There lot of clutching and grabbing, no two-line passing. There was a lot of different things to slow you down and make it easier for the bigger guys to grab you."

Gionta grabbed Gorges' attention when they became teammates with the Canadiens in 2009. Gorges respected Gionta's champion pedigree – he also won a national title as a senior in college – and noticed his professionalism.

"A guy I've looked up to for the last seven, eight years," Gorges said. "Brian's a very close friend of mine."

Gionta said: "He's one of my best friends, has been for long time. ... He's one of the guys I've really connected with. We've had each other's back for a long time."

That's why tonight will also be special for Gorges.

"To be out there and part of his 1,000th game, it's a proud moment for me," Gorges said. "I know it's a proud moment for him. We've talked about it before, and it's an amazing accomplishment. ... We're all looking forward to it."

Sabres' Dmitry Kulikov turns corner

By Bill Hoppe
Olean Times Herald
March 25, 2017

BUFFALO – To Sabres coach Dan Bylsma, the worst appears to be behind defenseman Dmitry Kulikov, who has struggled throughout an injured-plagued season.

Fresh off a nine-game absence, Kulikov enjoyed his finest outing all season in Saturday's 5-2 win over Toronto, scoring a power-play goal and feeding Jack Eichel for another score on the man advantage.

But before Kulikov returned from an upper-body injury, Bylsma could tell the Russian, who has battled a lower-back bruise all season, had turned a corner.

"The way he's practiced and the way he's looked and the way he's skated, (it) looks like he's gotten by all that and is at his best right now," Bylsma said this afternoon following practice inside HarborCenter.

Bylsma, whose Sabres host the Florida Panthers on Monday at KeyBank Center, said the 20 days Kulikov recently sat out was "maybe the most beneficial" stretch for him.

"His two practices last week were the best he's looked, and in the game, he also had the opportunity to also be on the power play," he said. "He looked real good running that power play with Jack up top, making the pass and scoring the goal.

"It's another seven games here to continue that and show what he can do."

He added: "It's a huge opportunity for Dmitry."

Kulikov, incredibly, has mustered two goals and four points in 40 games this season, his first with the Sabres. So Saturday, his 500th NHL appearance, he doubled his offensive output in just a few minutes.

"I was just trying to take advantage of the opportunity that I get in the last eight, seven games," Kulikov said.

The season, of course, has been difficult for Kulikov, who spent seven seasons with the Panthers. The 26-year-old was injured in his preseason debut and couldn't find any footing until recently.

"That was a hard thing to do from an injury standpoint," Bylsma said. "It's a hard thing to do from coming into a new team and then kind of having some spots where he wasn't with the group, wasn't with the team for long periods of time."

Sabres, Panthers play hard despite fading playoff hopes

The Associated Press

March 26, 2017

BUFFALO, N.Y. -- The playoffs may be out of reach for the Buffalo Sabres and Florida Panthers, but neither team has thrown in the towel on the season yet.

Fresh off one of each team's best wins of the season, the two sides will square off on Monday night at KeyBank Center.

The Sabres (31-32-12) are coming off a 5-2 home win over the Toronto Maple Leafs on Saturday that was a spoiler game for a variety of reasons.

With thousands of Toronto fans in attendance, the Sabres took control in the second period on their way to a dominant performance. And the Sabres presented a minor roadblock for the Maple Leafs' playoff push as their rivals compete for one of the final spots in the Eastern Conference.

Jack Eichel had two goals and an assist in the win for Buffalo.

"This is our building and we obviously want to play well here," Eichel said. "I think there was a little bit of extra emotion in our game, extra intensity. And it's good to see. ... A good 60-minute effort. A lot of guys played well. It's good to see some guys back healthy contributing. Another game Monday vs. Florida."

Ryan O'Reilly, Evander Kane and Dmitry Kulikov also scored for Buffalo. Robin Lehner continued his excellent season with 32 saves and had a spectacular highlight-reel stop midway through the second period that even fooled game officials. The goal light initially went on despite Lehner moving from post to post to make a brilliant stop.

"It was just fun. I think there's a lot of energy in the rink right from the start, a lot of emotion and those are fun games," Sabres forward Tyler Ennis said. "We haven't had a lot of those games in a while and I think we really felt that energy. Our fans were really loud and gave us a boost and I thought we played with a lot of jump, a lot of energy all game."

The Panthers (33-30-11), meanwhile, are coming off a shocking 7-0 win over the Chicago Blackhawks on Saturday. Jonathan Huberdeau had a goal and three assists and Jonathan Marchessault had a hat trick in the victory.

"When we play the right way, keep things simple and use our legs, that's exactly what we're capable of doing," Panthers coach Tom Rowe said, according to the team's website. "We talked about this kind of being a big game for us to kind of judge where we are and what we can do."

The Panthers also got help between the pipes from goalie James Reimer, who picked up his first shutout of the season.

"In the second period, we just got going," Reimer said, according to the team's website. "The guys worked hard. They played hard. I mean, if they get seven every night, I like our chances."

Vincent Trocheck (22 goals, 30 assists) leads the Panthers in scoring with 52 points. Aleksander Barkov is not far behind with 51 points (21 goals, 30 assists).

Ennis, Kulikov were 'at their best' against Toronto

By Jourdon LaBarber

Buffalo Sabres

March 26, 2017

With seven games left in the regular season for the Buffalo Sabres, the remaining time serves as an opportunity for the team to continue to prove to themselves exactly what level they're capable of playing at. They did that on Saturday night, winning 5-2 against a Toronto Maple Leafs team still fighting to maintain a spot in the postseason.

The same is true on an individual level, particularly for players like Tyler Ennis and Dmitry Kulikov. Both have dealt with injuries and therefore inconsistency this season and are looking to end on a positive note.

Ennis and Kulikov both enjoyed their first multi-point outings of the season on Saturday, and both returned to significant roles - Ennis on the top line and Kulikov on the top defensive pair - for practice at HarborCenter on Sunday.

For both players, the game against Toronto was among their best of the season. Ennis, playing on a line with Ryan O'Reilly and Kyle Okposo, gave a reminder of his acrobatic abilities in the offensive zone with a turn-around swing pass across the net to set up an O'Reilly goal in the first period. Later, he made the pass to set up a one-time goal for Kulikov on the power play.

Surgery on his groin in November has limited Ennis' season to just 44 games, an especially bad break considering he only played 23 games due to multiple injuries last season. He has just four goals and eight assists for 12 points this season, and had seen diminished ice time until being promoted to play on a line with O'Reilly and Jack Eichel in Anaheim on March 17.

Dan Bylsma thought back to Buffalo's game in San Jose earlier this month as an example of what earned Ennis another crack at the top line.

"We saw some spurts form Tyler, getting his jump back and then previously before we went on the road [in California] there were a couple really good examples of him kind of showing what he can do, playing in the offensive zone and dodging and weaving and losing guys with his agility.

"I think you saw that maybe at it's best in Anaheim, playing with those guys, and he's continued that. I thought last night was probably his best game of the year."

With more ice time, Ennis said, comes more comfort.

"Most of us, especially offensive guys, are guys that kind of play better when we get the flow of the game, we get more minutes," he said. "I couldn't ask for better linemates than Ryan and Kyle, two smart players who are reliable defensively, good guys. I thought we had some great jump last night."

Kulikov, meanwhile, came to training camp late due to his involvement at the World Cup of Hockey. After only two days of practice with his new team, a hard hit into the bench door during his preseason debut against Toronto aggravated a preexisting lower-back injury, one that would affect him for nearly the entirety of the season.

Kulikov missed three separate stretches of the season with that injury, time that not only could've been better spent on the ice but also growing comfortable in a new dressing room. He missed another stretch with a neck injury most recently, from which he returned on Saturday to score a goal and an assist.

"I think Dmitry, this last time off was maybe the most beneficial for him," Bylsma said. "His two practices last week were the best he's looked ... I feel now, the way he's practiced and the way he's looked and the way he's skated, it looks like he's gotten by all that and is at his best right now."

The Sabres return to play at home on Monday against another division opponent in the Florida Panthers. For Ennis, Kulikov and the team itself, it's the first of seven more chances to prove that their capable of playing the way they did against Toronto on a daily basis.

"I think we have to play like we know we can play," Ennis said. "I think [Toronto] was a good example."

Sunday'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

29 Jake McCabe - 77 Dmitry Kulikov
4 Josh Gorges - 41 Justin Falk
67 Brady Austin - 47 Zach Bogosian
44 Nicolas Deslauriers - 55 Rasmus Ristolainen

40 Robin Lehner
31 Anders Nilsson

From a Hotel to the Golden Dome

By Cal Petersen

The Players Tribune

March 25, 2017

It's pretty simple. Pick out any single point on somebody within your field of vision. For me, I like to focus on the little logo on our game socks ... eight minutes (exactly) before we step on the ice for warmups. Find a second teammate nearby and pick out the same thing. Then as fast as you can, for a minute or so, keep alternating between them. At first, try not to move your head. Then gradually start moving your head as if you were following a pass. Both spots, back and forth, whether they're moving or not. Stay locked in. Tune out everything else and concentrate on them for as long as you possibly can.

It's a good eye-warmup technique. It helps your focus when you have to instantly locate the puck in those critical moments in a game. I learned it from an older guy who had also played goalie when he was younger. We had talked a few times after games when I was playing in the USHL in Waterloo, Iowa. He told me about the technique and it has stuck with me ever since. I do it before every game now.

Maybe it sounds a little weird. But I feel like it's pretty tame for a goalie as far as pregame rituals are concerned. People who know hockey have all heard the rumors about goalies. How they're a little bit off. A little bit different. With all the stuff flying around out there, I can't tell you what's true and what isn't.

The eye stretch is legitimate, though. It's a real thing I do. And I can tell you that I, without a doubt, identify as a goalie — which means you can trust me.

I spent some time living out of a hotel in Chicago when I was 16. But it wasn't because of a weird goalie superstition or anything like that. (Though I'm sure that if Martin Brodeur came out tomorrow and said he credited all of his 691 wins to routinely staying at a hotel, goalies all over the country would start begging their parents to pack their bags and get on the road.)

I stayed in that hotel for a different reason: I was a little bit in limbo that year. I didn't know if I was going to get called up to stay for good with my hometown Waterloo Black Hawks or if I was going to spend the rest of the season in Chicago, where I was playing for an under-18 team in the Midwest Elite Hockey League.

Waterloo is obviously a decent drive from any major hockey city. When people think of Iowa, I know that the word *hockey* doesn't scream out right away, so maybe it seems a little unusual that my family would be so invested in my youth hockey career.

But my father was a goalie. That's how it all started. He didn't play in the NHL, but he minded net throughout college. He taught me to skate when I was four years old. Four years later, I started playing competitive hockey.

Naturally, I was a skater first. My dad didn't exactly try to prevent me from starting out my playing career as a goalie, but it clearly wasn't his first choice. Maybe he was afraid that I'd get injured, or that I wasn't big enough to master the nuances of the position back then. And as an ex-goaltender, he understood the pressures of being the last line of defense. I'm glad he let me though, because we have been best friends ever since.

I loved the pads. Ask any goalie how he first started and there's a good chance he will say he was enamored with the gear like I was. I had to wear them. It was like I had to be a goalie. I still remember the day I asked my parents for my first set of pads.

It could be that I was always a goalie — like I was born that way and deep down my parents always knew it — but it took me getting to a certain age for them to be comfortable admitting my potential. Like how Dumbledore waited until Harry Potter was 11 before telling him he was a wizard. (*Yer a 'tender, Calvin.*)

By the time I had turned 11 I was deep into the life. I had my pads. My mask. My life-size Martin Brodeur Fathead on my bedroom wall. The only thing I needed was the stiff competition. Playing for a Triple A team was step one.

And that's when the driving started. First came a Triple A team in Minneapolis (practically Wisconsin) and a couple of years later, a team in Madison. So three times a week during the season, one of my parents would pick me up after school and drive me 3½ hours to practice around the Twin Cities area. If it was a nice day, my dad would fly me in his small single-engine airplane, and it would cut the travel time down to an hour. The times in the car and the plane with my mom and dad are some of my fondest memories.

My parents only had one rule: "If we're going to spend half of our days driving you to hockey practice, you're going to make every single second of practice worth it."

That was their only condition, and I did my best to honor it. I was always sort of aware that they had contributed a lot for me to be able to play hockey, but I don't think it was until I got to college that I really thought about just how much time they actually spent just lugging me and my pads around in the car.

No matter how determined I was to play hockey, I literally could not have done it without so much support from them. It would have been physically impossible. No amount of heart or willpower can cover that amount of distance and travel expense. I'm very lucky that I just got to sleep in the car (and play hockey) while they did all of the actual hard labor.

After three years on the road, I stayed home the next year and played for my high school team. In addition to both JV and varsity practices, I practiced every day with the Waterloo Black Hawks. Three-a-days were definitely tough, but each one made me a better goaltender. But I didn't start a single varsity hockey game my freshman year. That next season, I had the option of staying in Iowa and trying to practice with the local USHL team, the Waterloo Black Hawks, or playing in Chicago for the Midwest Elite Hockey League. The opportunity was too good to pass up. I talked it over with my family and they gave me their support right from the beginning.

It was just a matter of getting the logistics worked out.

During the first few months, we found an unfurnished house for rent, and either my mom, dad, or aunt would stay with me while somebody else stayed back home in Iowa with my sister. It was exhausting, but we worked it out. Moving to a new city, a new school and a new house was tough, but it made me appreciate time with my family that much more. The season went well, but it was definitely a relief to go back home after it was over.

The following season was even harder. I had been drafted to play for Waterloo in the USHL, but I wound up splitting time between home and Chicago because the Young Americans had also invited me back to play for a second year. This time it wasn't so easy to find a house or create a convenient family schedule. So we ended up living for part of the year in a hotel. And trust me, it wasn't a nice one.

Parents don't want to live with their teenage kid in a hotel room. That sucks. It takes a mental toll. It was difficult for my entire family. Even my sister, who had to deal with everybody only being together during holidays, or sometimes on hockey weekends. She probably grew up just as fast as me during those years. She's the unsung hero.

The sacrifices families make so that one person can pursue their dream is hard to even believe. The only person who ever complained was probably me, when I was sore or exhausted. When I'd start to feel overwhelmed by it all, on nights when my body would ache while I'd be lying in my hotel room 300 miles from my real bed — tucked under a questionable green bedspread that apparently doesn't get washed regularly — I'd just think about what my parents had told me.

"Make every second count."

I eventually left Chicago for home to play for the Black Hawks full-time. I got to sleep in my own bed and my whole family was under one roof again. The drive to the rink was five minutes, and I got to play in front of my hometown fans, on a team I had been watching for as long as I could remember, and in a building where I had laced up my first skates and strapped on my first pair of pads. Everything was perfect.

I was excited when I got asked to visit Notre Dame. My family was excited. After I made my first visit, my parents told me to wait a bit and really consider my options. But I called Coach Jackson the night I got home. I couldn't wait. It just felt right. The campus, the facilities, the culture, the history — there was a sense of a pride that I could feel right when I stepped foot on campus. This was home for me. Plus, the hockey team needed a goalie.

In my mind, there was really nothing else to consider. Stars had aligned. When Coach Jackson and I were talking about whether I would have the opportunity to play as a freshman, he told me something that has stuck with me: "Cal, I promise you one thing, you will get what you earn." As soon as I put on the Notre Dame sweater for the first time, I felt like this was it. All the years of playing for so many different teams in so many different places, of putting my family through so much, this was where it all came together. I told myself that I was going to make every second in South Bend count.

There's so much tradition at Notre Dame. And it's so exciting to be able to play in front of a college crowd that's your friends, classmates and alumni — all die-hard Irish supporters. It's the kind of environment you live for, and there is nothing that rivals Compton Family Ice Arena on a Friday or Saturday night. With the band blasting the fight song throughout the building, there is only one goal that comes to your mind, and in giant letters in the building, everyone is reminded: Onward to Victory.

Last year we got a taste of something beyond the regular season. This year feels almost like a continuation of that story. And as the championship field starts, there's an energy right now in our locker room. This is the most fun hockey can be. All the hard work we put in — all the way back from two weeks after last season ended, through the summer, the regular season and the conference playoffs. At this point, every game matters. Every shot. Every goal. Every save.

You imagine these games in your head — the big moments and the high stakes. Every day that you spent grinding — the bike rides in the summer, the drives to the rink, the infamous Notre Dame Gauntlet Run — you were imagining yourself playing in this tournament. And best of all, you're going to be playing with 26 of your best friends.

And now it starts. Sixteen teams competing for a shot at the championship. Everything has been leading up to this. Minneapolis, Madison, Chicago and Waterloo have all led me to South Bend. And it's time to play hockey ... But first, I have to stare at the little logo on our game socks.

Eichel, Sabres punch out Maple Leafs and their fans

By John Vogl

The Buffalo News

March 25, 2017

With both arms and one leg up during an emphatic celebration, Jack Eichel glided toward the boards. All he saw were Maple Leafs fans.

His punch of the glass told them they were in the wrong place on the wrong night.

"When you see that many Toronto people down here watching their team, it was almost like they overtook our building a little bit," Eichel said Saturday. "I just want to defend it and do as much as we can to get the win."

Eichel and the Sabres did more than enough to defend KeyBank Center. They pounded the Leafs, 5-2, silencing the Toronto backers who were shouting, "Go, Leafs, go" well before the puck dropped.

"This is our building, so obviously want to play well here," Eichel said. "There was a little bit extra emotion in our game, a little bit extra intensity. It's good to see. We always like to play against them. It's obviously a rival, and nice to beat them."

Buffalo fans have embraced the rivalry with Toronto since 1970. The Sabres have undergone massive roster turnover during the past few seasons, but nights like Saturday have quickly shown them what it means to play their northern neighbors.

"It was nice to get a taste of what this building can be," center Ryan O'Reilly said.

"Right before the puck dropped, it was so loud in there," left wing Tyler Ennis said. "We were skating around and were saying, 'Let's go tonight. This should be a fun one. These are the best ones. Let's have some fun.'"

"When you get energy and you're having fun, you play with another level. We played with that extra level, and we showed what we could do."

The Sabres built a 2-1 lead after one period and extended it to 5-2 after two. In a season littered with third-period letdowns, they shut the door on Toronto.

"The crowd was amazing," defenseman Dmitry Kulikov said. "It's a lot of fun when the crowd is going and you can feel the buzz in the building."

Plenty of players provided the buzz. Eichel had two goals and an assist, while Ennis, O'Reilly, Kulikov and Kyle Okposo had two-point nights.

The Sabres scored the final three goals of the second period, a frame that has often been their undoing.

"We took to them for a while and played in their end," Eichel said. "We played a lot more aggressive, and I think that's what we need to do. Our D were coming down the walls. Our forwards were making their D turn pucks over. We had some good contributions."

Two contributions were a long time coming. Ennis, whose last two seasons have been interrupted by concussions and sports hernia/groin surgery, had his first multipoint game since Oct. 24, 2015. He has points in two of three games since being promoted to the top line.

"I've been playing more, and I've been playing with some good players," said Ennis, who skated with O'Reilly and Okposo. "You put those two things together – ice time and two players – and the goals are going to come and the chances are going to come, and the wins are coming."

Kulikov had one goal and one assist in his opening 39 games. He matched that in a span of 3:12 during the second period. His assist was a power-play pass onto the stick of Eichel for a massive one-timer.

"As soon I got the puck, I took a look and he was wide-open," Kulikov said. "It was a no-brainer to just give him the puck for a one-timer."

Eichel skated to the boards after his second goal, the knockout punch that made it 5-2. He has 23 goals, 30 assists and 53 points in 54 games.

About the only thing missing Saturday night was a hat trick – Buffalo hasn't had one at home since Thomas Vanek on April 5, 2011 – but there were enough highlights. Besides, the Leafs come back to town April 3. There needs to be something left to taunt their fans.

"It was a fun game to play," Sabres goaltender Robin Lehner said. "We don't want them to win here. We play them one more time here, and we want to win that, too. We don't wish them any success."

Mike Harrington: Leafs fans enter loudly, leave quietly after clunker

By Mike Harrington

The Buffalo News

March 25, 2017

Business must have been booming at the Peace Bridge late Saturday afternoon.

Fans of the Toronto Maple Leafs always make their presence known in Buffalo. But what we saw Saturday night in KeyBank Center was a full-scale takeover.

There was a roar when the Leafs took the ice for warmups, an eruption when they entered to start play and "O Canada" was sang at levels you never hear in the building.

Air Canada Centre South then erupted with Connor Brown's tying goal at 9:30 of the first period. All the noise was to embarrassing levels that you hope the Sabres remember as an organization. The goal here, of course, is to have the whole place cheering for them, to not have their season-ticket holders cash out on the season and do a money grab from Toronto fans.

"It was great. A lot of blue jerseys in the stands, a lot of Maple Leaf jerseys," said rookie sensation Auston Matthews. "We travel pretty well, all across the country. But especially when you're just across the border here in Buffalo, it's definitely an exciting game."

The excitement was mostly one-sided. The Leafs lost goalie Frederik Andersen to a mysterious injury after one period and their playoff express went off the rails for a night with a 5-2 Sabres victory. The Leafs were 7-1-1 in their previous nine games and held a three-point lead for third place in the Atlantic Division. But they couldn't match the Sabres' intensity.

After the morning skate, Nazem Kadri was recalling a game here late in the 2013 lockout season, the last time the Leafs made the playoffs. Kadri scored a goal and saw a bunch of Leafs fans at one corner of the rink. They were celebrating wildly and he joined them, leaping into the glass as the fans loved it. Getty Images captured the picture, which quickly spread across Canada.

"That's one of my favorite pictures. I've got it actually on my wall," Kadri said. "It seems like you're at the ACC in that picture with the amount of Leaf fans in the backdrop. That's been the story anywhere we go. The Leaf Nation follows us and supports us through thick and thin. It was frustrating in years past but now the future's bright."

No question about that. And the folks in Blue and White, who traveled during so many tough times, were ready Saturday night in the midst of a playoff push. They didn't have much to yell over.

Full marks to the Sabres, who seemed riled by the passion in the stands for the other team. Jack Eichel, among others, has clearly tired of hearing about the Leafs and how their rebuild is ahead of Buffalo. When Eichel scored his second goal of the second period, he headed for the glass in the same end of the rink where Kadri was four years ago, right for two Leafs fans in jerseys in the front row. Banged the glass and even spit on the ice in front of them.

Our house, indeed.

"We're not happy with the way we came out. They're a good team that has good players," said Toronto defenseman Morgan Rielly. "They capitalized on their chances and we let that one get away from us and in that span they buried a couple."

Specifically, the Sabres got power-play goals from Eichel and Dmitry Kulikov in a span of just over three minutes early in the second period to turn a 2-2 game into a 4-2 Buffalo lead. And Eichel scored his goal just 25 seconds after Matthews netted his 34th, tying Wendel Clark's rookie record for the Leafs set in 1986.

Matthews said the Leafs' pre-scouted Eichel hard but were unable to stop him.

"He's obviously got that shot on the power play. That's on us," Matthews said. "Have to make sure we're in the lane and stuff like that. He's got that stride, that speed and strength. He can make plays all over the ice."

One game, no matter the result, is not a referendum on the teams' rebuilds. Nor is even one season, which is likely going to end with the Sabres on the golf course and the Leafs hoping to be in the playoffs for the first time in a full campaign since 2004.

Toronto may have leapfrogged ahead of Buffalo, at least for now with an 11-point advantage, and re-energized its fan base. Still, the Blue and White crowd routinely shows in Buffalo but rarely gets rewarded. The Sabres are 18-2-1 in their last 21 at home against Toronto.

"We weren't very good. For whatever reason, they were quicker, they were better, they were hungrier," Leafs coach Mike Babcock said. "Obviously coming into the game, I thought we had more to play for than they did but pride is a wonderful thing. If you get your group to dig in like they did tonight, they looked good and we didn't. So, good for them."

By the third period, the Leafs fans were silent and many made their exit. There were no more "Go Leafs Go" chants. For one night, the Sabres had the upper hand. At least for this year, the Leafs are hoping to get the last laugh.

Sabres Notebook: Nylander hears brother's frustration; Lehner expects hard-working finish

By John Vogl

The Buffalo News

March 25, 2017

William Nylander can hear it in his younger brother's voice. Alex Nylander is having a frustrating season.

While the elder Nylander is exploding onto the NHL scene with the Toronto Maple Leafs, Alex Nylander is experiencing the expected ups and downs in the American Hockey League.

The Sabres prospect is one of just 20 18-year-olds to play at least 15 games in the AHL since 1990. He entered Rochester's game in Binghamton on Saturday night with nine goals and 26 points in 58 games.

"I talk to him almost like every day," William Nylander said Saturday in KeyBank Center. "He's learning. It's a little different league. It takes time to get going. He's been going a little up and down, and hopefully he can finish the season off well."

At .45 points per game, Alex Nylander is 10th in production among the AHL's 20 18-year-olds since 1990. William Nylander is fourth on the list after putting up 14 goals and 32 points in 37 games with Toronto's farm club in 2014-15.

"It's a learning process," William Nylander said. "Every player has got to go through that stuff. He's learning. It will be a good year for him."

Both Nylanders are products of Sweden's junior program, and the country recently lobbied NHL general managers to keep their Swedish prospects at home. Sabres GM Tim Murray is against that, and William Nylander's experience shows why.

The rookie entered Saturday's game against the Sabres with 21 goals and 56 points in 72 games with the Maple Leafs.

"The AHL was good for me," he said. "You got to play against men. Especially coming from Sweden on a smaller rink, it helped out for me."

Coach Dan Bylsma acknowledges the Sabres' brass will be watching closely during the final eight games to see who wants to be in Buffalo. Goaltender Robin Lehner hopes his teammates realize it.

"We've got to play for our careers," Lehner said. "This is our job. It doesn't matter if you're in the playoffs or not. It's very important games for a lot of players in here and us as a team. We can't just put our skates on."

"Going forward with the plans for this team, there's a lot of eyes on us right now. I think the guys up top are really looking at who wants to be on this team going forward. It's up to each and every one of us to try and make a statement and show that you want to be here and care for this team."

"If you just put the skates on now, it's not fair to our organization and it's not fair to our fans. You've really got to keep going."

Rasmus Ristolainen sat the first game of his three-game suspension. With the defenseman unavailable to man the blue line, the Sabres planned to use five forwards on their first power play. Ryan O'Reilly will play up top, Jack Eichel and Kyle Okposo will man the wings, while Evander Kane and Sam Reinhart will play in front of the net.

"You need to have a special guy on top to be able to do it, a guy who is comfortable there, responsible there," Bylsma said. "For some players, it's a little bit of an island, but Ryan has been there, sometimes rotates there in our rotation on our power play, has some comfort there.

"It adds some dynamic to your power play in some ways. The forwards have to have defensive responsibility as well. That doesn't change when it goes to five forwards. The flank guys still need to have that awareness defensively."

Goalie Jonas Johansson, the Sabres' third-round draft pick in 2014, made his North American debut Saturday night for the Amerks. Rochester has signed Johansson, forward Justin Danforth and defenseman Ian Brady to amateur tryout contracts for the remainder of the season.

Johansson played 37 games for Almtuna of Sweden's secondary league, going 17-18 with a .912 save percentage. Danforth had 10 goals and 32 points in 37 games during his senior season at Sacred Heart University. Brady recorded three goals and 21 points in 32 games during his final year at the University of Nebraska-Omaha.

Quick Hits: Sabres 5, Maple Leafs 2

By John Vogl

The Buffalo News

March 25, 2017

They came. They saw. They went home depressed.

Again.

Fans of the Toronto Maple Leafs helped make KeyBank Center a rollicking place Saturday night, but Buffalo backers had the most fun – as usual. The Sabres repeatedly lifted their fans out of the seats with a 5-2 victory.

Buffalo improved to 18-2-1 in its last 21 home games against the Maple Leafs. The Sabres are 69-26-8 all time against Toronto downtown.

Multipoint attack: The Sabres had five players with at least two points, led by Jack Eichel's two-goal, one-assist outing. The center has 23 goals, 30 assists and 53 points in 54 games.

Ryan O'Reilly and Dmitry Kulikov had a goal and assist each, while Kyle Okposo and Tyler Ennis each had two assists. It was Ennis' first multipoint game since Oct. 24, 2015.

Lit: Sabres goaltender Robin Lehner made 32 saves. His biggest allowed the Sabres to keep a 4-2 lead midway through the second. Mitch Marner was so wide-open in front that the goal light went on after he shot, but Lehner made the stop.

Home cooking: O'Reilly continued his hot play in Buffalo, getting both of his points in the first period as the Sabres built a 2-1 lead. O'Reilly has reached the score sheet in 16 of the last 19 home games, putting up eight goals and 15 assists.

O'Reilly staked the Sabres to a 1-0 lead with 7:05 off the clock off a spinning pass from Ennis. After an 11-game skid without a point, Ennis has points in two of the last three.

Bang, bang: The Leafs tied the game with 9:30 gone. Lehner stopped Leo Komarov's point-blank blast, but Jake McCabe pushed the puck to Connor Brown for an easy putback.

The tie lasted a whopping 15 seconds. Evander Kane outbattled Leafs defenseman Matt Hunwick in front of the net, allowing him to get to Zach Bogosian's rebound and bring the Buffalo fans back out of their seats for a 2-1 lead.

That hurts: Maple Leafs goaltender Frederik Andersen made 14 saves during the first period, but he didn't come out for the second because of an upper-body injury. Curtis McElhinney replaced Andersen, and the Sabres pounced for three goals in the second to take a 5-2 lead.

Young guns: Auston Matthews tied Wendel Clark's record for goals by a Toronto rookie, scoring his 34th with 2:22 gone in the second. William Nylander earned an assist on the tying goal, extending his point streak to 11 games.

Three in a row: Eichel and the Sabres' power play each struck twice as the home team turned the 2-2 tie into a 5-2 lead. Eichel made it 3-2 and 5-2. His first goal was a power-play rocket from the left circle. His second goal was a low shot from the right circle.

After the second tally, he skated to the boards and punched the glass in front of Leafs fans.

Doubling up: With two points in 3:12, Kulikov doubled his season output. He earned his second assist in 40 games by setting up Eichel's first goal. Kulikov scored his second of the year with a power-play blast that made it 4-2.

Back in blue: As expected, the Sabres added four pieces to their lineup. Okposo returned after missing 10 games with a rib injury, while left wing William Carrier (knee) came back after sitting for 24 games. Kulikov had missed nine games with a concussion, while Justin Falk returned after sitting four games with a calf ailment.

With Rasmus Ristolainen serving the first of his three-game suspension, Buffalo recalled defenseman Brady Austin from Rochester for his third straight NHL game. The Sabres sent forward Hudson Fasching back to the Amerks.

Milestones: Kulikov skated in his 500th NHL game. The opening 460 came with the Florida Panthers. Toronto's Nazem Kadri played in his 400th game.

Next: The Sabres will return with back-to-back outings. They host the Florida Panthers on Monday, and they'll visit the Columbus Blue Jackets on Tuesday.

Inside the Sabres: Alumni ready to talk; Murray calls in favor; Petersen offered starting job

By John Vogl

The Buffalo News

March 25, 2017

There have been times during the Sabres' alumni wine festival when Larry Playfair barely moves. Someone will stop him to chat, then someone else. Next thing Playfair knows, it's time to go home.

The good old days are a never-ending topic of conversation. The next talks are Wednesday.

For the 13th straight year, Buffalo's former players will mingle with fans at the annual wine festival. The event will run from 6-9:30 p.m. in KeyBank Center.

"It's one of those events that's fun to go to, especially if you're a fan and you wanted to chat with someone or get an autograph, it's not hard to do at all," Playfair said. "You just don't get very far because people want to chat. They want to ask questions they've always wanted to ask."

Playfair and the players gladly give answers. Last year's event featured more than two dozen alumni, including Gilbert Perreault, Rene Robert, Danny Gare, Mike Foligno, Michael Peca, Don Luce and Jim Lorentz.

It's one of the highlights on their calendar, primarily because of the event's focus.

"It's been a wonderful, wonderful way for us to raise money and awareness to breast cancer care here in Western New York," said Playfair, the longtime Buffalo defenseman and director of alumni relations.

The event began 13 years ago after a few players' wives and family members became afflicted with breast cancer. Wine tours weren't yet a big thing in the area, so Playfair invited wineries from Southern Ontario down to Buffalo for a money-raising meet and greet. It quickly grew to include Western New York wineries and restaurants.

"What's happened now is some of the wineries come because they've had somebody in their family afflicted with breast cancer," Playfair said. "All the money goes to breast cancer care in Western New York. They feel good about giving something back. It's really amazing."

The event's legacy is visible on Buffalo's streets and church parking lots. The alumni association helped purchase and sponsor the Mobile Mammography Coach, a pink bus that travels throughout the area and offers mammograms to women who otherwise wouldn't be able to get them. The bus hit the road in 2012, and nearly 4,000 women got exams in the first two years alone.

"It's the thing I am most proud of," Playfair said.

The current Sabres have joined the fundraiser, putting together baskets that will be raffled during the event. Tickets for the festival are \$75 and are available at Sabres.com/WineFest, the arena box office or by calling Nick Fearby at 855-4452.

The former Sabres are ready to talk.

"Our guys are always happy to come in, and they're great ambassadors to the Buffalo Sabres," Playfair said. "But be careful that you give the alumni guys too much credit because really it was our wives that rolled up their sleeves. The girls do the heavy lifting, and it's grown to even more of an event now where the Sabres' community relations group has jumped in and taken it to another level.

"It's a good time."

CALLING IN A FAVOR

Rostislav Klesla may help the Sabres after all.

Buffalo acquired the defenseman in a trade with Washington in March 2014. The Sabres sent goaltender Jaroslav Halak and a 2015 third-round pick to the Capitals in exchange for Klesla and goalie Michal Neuvirth.

Klesla never showed up. He went home to the Czech Republic, and the Sabres waived him a month later. It seemed like a waste.

Not anymore. Klesla, acquired by Washington just one day prior to the trade with Buffalo, never figured in the Capitals' plans, either. It appears Sabres General Manager Tim Murray agreed to take him off their books as a favor.

Washington's general manager at the time was George McPhee, who is now the GM in Vegas. The Golden Knights are prepping for June's expansion draft, and Murray has reached out.

"I've had a conversation or two with George on who I wouldn't like to lose and how we can make that happen," Murray said during his weekly show on WGR-AM 550. "Maybe I've done a deal with George in the past that was considered somewhat of a favor. Maybe I've had a conversation with him reminding him of that, and he remembered the wordage of that deal word-for-word, which I was very happy to hear."

The Klesla trade could allow Murray to expose someone in the expansion draft – and therefore protect someone else – knowing McPhee won't take the guy.

"There are things that happen in this game," Murray said. "You only do a favor when it suits you. You do a favor for somebody when you can afford to do that favor now, knowing that you might need something down the road. That's what favors are."

PETERSEN'S DECISION

The Sabres want Cal Petersen to turn pro. They also want the Notre Dame goalie to join their organization.

They feel they've done everything they can to make it happen.

Petersen, a fifth-round pick in 2013, has led the Fighting Irish into this weekend's NCAA Tournament. The junior went 21-11-5 with a .928 save percentage and 2.14 goals against average. He has made 87 straight starts.

"We've made our opinion pretty clear: What more does he have to accomplish at the college level?" Murray said during his radio show. "He's been a stud goalie there. He's been a workhorse goalie there."

If Petersen leaves school, the Sabres would have a limited time to sign him. After he notifies NHL Central Registry he is no longer a student, Petersen would become an unrestricted free agent 30 days after his announcement or June 1, whichever is later.

"He's got a good relationship with Andrew Allen, our goalie coach," Murray said. "He's got a great relationship with Seamus Kotyk, who is an ex-goalie who is a scout for us and does concentrate on goaltenders for us when he does scout. Our player development staff led by Jason Long have had tons of interaction with him. Jerry Forton, who's from Buffalo who's our main college guy, so the communications and the viewings and the effort's been put in, but without bugging him, without texting him five times a day, without looking like we're somewhat in panic mode whether we're going to get him signed or not."

"The decision's going to come to him, to his family and his representatives, but I think our staff has done a good job with him, and I think that he's been treated more than fairly by the organization."

In an ideal world, the Sabres would have Robin Lehner and Linus Ullmark fill the net in Buffalo next season, while Petersen would get the No. 1 job in Rochester.

"The relationship's a big part of it, but also opportunity is a big part of it," Murray said. "We've explained the opportunity here, and we think there's an opportunity for him to start out as the starter in the American Hockey League next year and continue this great progression that he's had."

Sabres silence Toronto fans, beat Maple Leafs

By Bill Hoppe
Olean Times Herald
March 25, 2017

BUFFALO – The 11,000 or so Toronto Maple Leafs fans who invaded a packed KeyBank Center on Saturday – they greatly outnumbered the home portion – started making their presence known about 20 minutes before the opening faceoff of the Sabres' entertaining 5-2 win.

This visit from the upstart Leafs was different than recent ones throughout their sorry run of futility. For the first time in a *long* time, Toronto is good, filled with prime young talent and positioned in a playoff spot.

Toronto fans, who have waited a long time for the Leafs to rank among the NHL's elite, are understandably excited.

So before the game began, they got loud and raucous, chanting, "Go Leafs, go." They roared when the Leafs skated on the ice and sang along with "O, Canada." They didn't let up after the contest started, either.

But by the second period, after the Sabres scored three straight goals to pull away – young star Jack Eichel scored twice and assisted on the other goal – the Leafs fans were silenced.

Sabres fans had their building back. Their team had the game.

"It was just fun," said Sabres winger Tyler Ennis, who had two assists. "There was a lot of energy in the rink right from the start, a lot of of emotion – and those are fun games. We haven't had a lot of those games in a while.

"I think we really felt that energy. I think our fans were really loud and gave us a boost. I think we played with a lot of jump, a lot of energy all game."

What about silencing those Leafs fans?

"The goal ... is to keep it quiet," Ennis said.

The Sabres, whose rebuild was supposed to be ahead of Toronto's, trail their fiercest rival by 11 points. Still, perhaps they take some solace in continuing the Leafs' run of futility here.

The Leafs won 2-1 in their last visit Nov. 3. But the Sabres are now 18-2-1 in their last 21 home games against the Leafs.

The Sabres have been downright terrible in second periods this season, getting outscored 79-59. Saturday's second started ominously, too, with slick Leafs youngster Auston Matthews scoring his 34th goal – that tied Wendel Clark's franchise record – to tie it at 2 at 2:22.

Eichel, however, answered 25 seconds later on the power play, beating Leafs goalie Curtis McElhinney with a wicked one-timer from the left circle.

The Sabres never relinquished the lead. Sabres defenseman Dmitry Kulikov scored on another power-play one-timer at 5:59.

"We played a lot more aggressive," Eichel said of the second period. "I think that's what we need to do. Our D were coming down the walls. Our forwards were making their D turn pucks over."

Kulikov, a colossal disappointment as he has battled injuries all season, returned after an upper-body injury sidelined him nine games. The Russian began the night with one goal and two points in 39 contests. He also assisted on Eichel's first goal, so in just a few minutes he doubled his goal and point output for the *season*.

"We know the type of player that he can be and the skill that he has," Eichel said. "That shot's a real weapon. He did a great job distributing the puck tonight."

Sabres coach Dan Bylsma added: "The last two days have been (Kulikov's) most aggressive and physical and the way he can play. He stepped right into the game and showed that."

Kulikov, who played his 500th NHL game, skated 23 minutes, 55 seconds.

"I was just trying to take advantage of the opportunity that I get in the last eight, seven games," he said.

Eichel scored again from the right circle at 13:12.

The Sabres, who have had trouble closing out late leads, won their 18th home contest.

By the end, many of the Leafs fans in the capacity crowd of 19,070 departed early.

Sabres center Ryan O'Reilly opened then scoring early and also added an assist. The Sabres improved to 10-0-1 when he has two or more points.

After Toronto's Connor Brown tied it at 9:30, Evander Kane's first goal in six games and team-leading 26th put the Sabres ahead again 15 seconds later.

Sabres goalie Robin Lehner quietly made 32 saves. Meanwhile, Leafs starting goalie Frederik Andersen left with an undisclosed injury after the first period.

Sabres' Zach Bogosian has chance to impress

By Bill Hoppe
Olean Times Herald
March 25, 2017

BUFFALO – Sabres defenseman Zach Bogosian's ninth NHL season has become perhaps his worst.

While the Massena native still plays just over 20 minutes a game, he believes his role has diminished a bit. He no longer plays on the power play regularly. With only one goal and nine points in 49 games, he could set new offensive lows.

Bogosian, by the way, will miss the postseason again. Saturday's 5-2 win against the Toronto Maple Leafs at KeyBank Center was his 527th NHL appearance. He has never played in a playoff game.

"It's never fun when you're out of the playoffs," Bogosian said prior to the game. "It's never fun when you're not having your greatest year. I don't know if I get frustrated. It's definitely disappointing.

"I've definitely had a little bit of a different role this year than I've been used to. That's something you really can't pinpoint one thing or another. It just seemed to be the way things were going this year. I'm just trying to finish strong here."

Bogosian, 26, has an opportunity to finish on a high note. With top defenseman Rasmus Ristolainen suspended for the next three games and the blue line banged up, Bogosian should receive some heavy action.

After Ristolainen got ejected from Tuesday's 3-1 loss to Pittsburgh, Sabres coach Dan Bylsma turned to Bogosian, skating him a career-high 33 minutes, 29 seconds.

"He stepped into 33 minutes, which is a ton for anybody," Bylsma said. "You can expect him to see his minutes in the next three games with Rasmus out."

Bogosian has skated more than 20 minutes per game every season since 2009-10, his second NHL campaign. He usually averages around 22 or 23 minutes per outing a season. He averaged 22:21 last season and a whopping 26:34 in 21 contests after the Sabres acquired him from Winnipeg in 2014-15.

Bylsma said other than Ristolainen, his defensemen have all played about the same amount.

"Zach hasn't gotten the power play time that he got at the end of the year last year," he said. "But minus that, his role continues to be a guy who we need to play good defense, shut down maybe not the top-pairing guys but the second-pairing guys."

Still, to Bogosian, who had skated under 20 minutes in 15 of the last 20 games entering Saturday, his role is "tough." He played 21:24 against the Leafs.

"You're used to playing a lot of minutes your entire career," he said. "When things get cut down a little bit, it's tough when you're not put in situations where you're used to being in."

Bogosian said he has "always felt comfortable playing a lot of minutes." Playing so much – he had 38 shifts in a 60-minute game Tuesday – allows the former third overall pick to find a groove.

"Mentally and physically you're engaged," Bogosian said. "There seems to be no hesitation when you play that much. A lot of people would argue you get overwhelmed with a lot of things, but ... you just try to go out there and just play. The flow of the game, you're always going over the boards."

For the second time in six days, the Sabres recalled Brady Austin from the Rochester Americans. Days ago, the defenseman was an unknown prospect, a former seventh-round pick 200 games into his pro career.

But two games into his NHL career, Austin, 23, has already turned some heads, utilizing his 6-foot-4, 230-pound body while showcasing notable speed for a big man.

That's why the Sabres summoned him again Saturday morning.

"Stepping into Detroit (on Monday) and playing the way he did there, you really wanted to see what he could do there, his size," Bylsma said. "He's got the ability to play a tougher game, a physical game and stepped right in in Detroit.

"I think the way he played that game was a surprise. He was big, strong, physical. ... It's been a long opportunity coming, it's been three years in our organization. He finally gets a couple games here to show what he could do."

The blue line looked different Saturday, with Justin Falk (bruise) and Dmitry Kulikov (upper body) returning. Ristolainen missed his first game.

Sabres wingers William Carrier (bone bruise) and Kyle Okposo (ribs) also returned.

Notes: The Sabres sent rookie winger Hudson Fasching to the Amerks before the game. ... Kulikov played his 500th NHL game. "I thought I was about 10, 15 away from 500," he said. "Good surprise."... Sabres center Ryan O'Reilly hit the 50-point mark Saturday for the fourth straight season and the fifth time in his career.

Eichel scores 2 in Sabres 5-2 win over Maple Leafs

By John Wawrow

The Associated Press

March 25, 2017

BUFFALO, N.Y. (AP) — Sabres forward Jack Eichel would like to thank the thousands of Maple Leafs fans who showed up in Buffalo to provide an electric environment to what's been a difficult season.

And Eichel was more than pleased to send the "Go, Leafs, Go!" chanting contingent back across the border unhappy following a 5-2 win Saturday night.

"This is our building and obviously want to play well here," Eichel said. "I think there was a little bit of extra emotion in our game tonight, extra intensity. And it's good to see. ... It's nice to beat them."

Eichel scored twice and set up another in dousing the celebratory atmosphere and slowing the youth-laden Maple Leafs' late-season surge to clinch just their second playoff berth in 12 seasons.

Ryan O'Reilly and Dmitry Kulikov each had a goal and assist, and Evander Kane also scored in a game the Sabres took control of by scoring three straight times in the second period. Robin Lehner stopped 32 shots, and the Sabres continued their home dominance over their cross-border rivals by improving to 18-2-1 against Toronto in their last 21 games at Buffalo.

The Maple Leafs' hold on third place in the Atlantic Division dwindled in having a three-game winning streak end and losing in regulation for just the second time in their past 10 (7-2-1).

With 85 points, Toronto has a one-point edge over Boston after the Bruins beat the New York Islanders.

"We know the importance of every game here and to come out and put yourself in a position where you're playing catch-up basically all night is tough," Toronto defenseman Morgan Rielly said. "We want to be better. We expect ourselves to be better than that."

Auston Matthews scored his 34th to tie Toronto's single-season rookie record set by Wendel Clark in 1985-86. Matthews matched the mark in the same arena the Maple Leafs selected the player from Scottsdale, Arizona, with the No. 1 pick in the draft last June.

Connor Brown also scored for Toronto.

Maple Leafs goalie Frederik Andersen allowed two goals on 16 shots in the opening period and did not return for the second after sustaining an upper-body injury. He appeared to be hurt during a collision with Buffalo forward William Carrier.

Coach Mike Babcock had no immediate update on Andersen's injury, saying the player would have to first undergo tests.

What Babcock was sure of was Andersen's injury having no effect on the outcome.

"This is all on us," he said. "They were better. They skated better. They were quicker. They responded after we scored. They looked prepared. We didn't. Period."

Curtis McElhinney took over and promptly gave up two power-play goals on the first eight shots he faced.

After Matthews scored 2:22 into the period to tie it at 2, Eichel scored 26 seconds later. He was set up in the left circle by Kulikov and snapped a shot in over McElhinney's right shoulder.

Kulikov then put Buffalo up 4-2 four minutes later by firing a 30-footer through a crowd and beating McElhinney inside the left post.

Eichel capped the second-period run by scoring on a snapshot from the right circle with 6:48 left.

McElhinney allowed three goals on 22 in the loss.

Thanks to the Maple Leafs fans making the trip across the Niagara River, the Sabres enjoyed a playoff-like atmosphere at a time they're in jeopardy of missing the postseason for a sixth consecutive year.

During the pregame skate, several fans unfurled a large banner reading "MITCH!!!" in honor of Maple Leafs rookie Mitchell Marner behind the Sabres bench. At one point, the Sabres turned up the volume on the music played between whistles to drown out the pro-Toronto chants.

The Sabres then did their part to mute their opposing fans further.

O'Reilly opened the scoring. And then after Brown tied the game 9:30 in, Kane responded by scoring 15 seconds later.

With five minutes left, many of the Toronto fans had exited the building.

"That's the fun part," said Sabres forward Tyler Ennis. "The goal is to keep it quiet."

NOTES: Sabres RW Kyle Okposo had two assists in returning after missing 10 games with a rib injury. Kulikov played his 500th game in returning after missing nine with an upper-body injury. ... Maple Leafs C William Nylander assisted on Matthews' goal to extend his rookie franchise-record streak to 11 games in which he has four goals and nine assists. ... Buffalo recalled D Brady Austin from AHL Rochester, and demoted RW Hudson Fasching.

UP NEXT

Maple Leafs: Host Florida Panthers on Tuesday.

Sabres: Host Florida Panthers on Monday.

Ryan O'Reilly weighs in on Sidney Crosby spear: 'It happens'

By Chris Johnston

Sportsnet

March 25, 2017

BUFFALO, N.Y. – After getting speared in a delicate place by Sidney Crosby earlier this week, Buffalo Sabres centre Ryan O'Reilly harbours no ill feelings.

"I didn't expect it, he apologized after the play and it was understood," O'Reilly said Saturday before facing Toronto. "It threw me off, I wasn't expecting anything and then something happens. I think he's a good guy, he's just playing hard and he takes a beating every night, too.

"It happens."

The incident occurred early in Tuesday's visit by the Pittsburgh Penguins. O'Reilly fell to the ice after taking the stick and didn't realize Crosby had delivered the blow until afterwards.

"I'm watching the play, watching the puck and the next thing I remember is getting a stick right to the crotch," said O'Reilly. "It threw me off, for sure. I got up slowly and turned around, I was trying to see who it was. And then off the one faceoff he comes up, or as we were skating down the ice and says 'Yeah, sorry about that. I was going for your stick.' I was like 'Ah, it happens, I guess.'

"It would have been nice to have a penalty."

O'Reilly and Crosby have twice been Team Canada teammates – winning the 2015 IIHF World Hockey Championship together and the World Cup last September.

The Sabres forward seemed willing to offer the league's leading goal-scorer the benefit of the doubt.

Crosby also caused a stir in Ottawa on Thursday when defenceman Marc Methot had his left pinky finger mangled by a slash from the Penguins captain – an incident that prompted Senators owner Eugene Melnyk to lash out against Crosby in a radio interview.

"I saw the slash on (Methot), that's an unfortunate play," said O'Reilly. "People are asking me about what happened with myself. It was a weird thing, but it happens."

Eichel scores twice, Sabres thump Leafs 5-2

By Pat Malacaro

WGR 550

March 25, 2017

Jack Eichel scored twice in the second period and assisted on another goal to lead the Sabres to a 5-2 win over the Toronto Maple Leafs on Saturday night at KeyBank Center.

First Period

17:41 - The energy inside of the building is palpable. With the amount of Maple Leafs fans here tonight there have been several "Go Leafs Go!" chants and Sabres' fans try to drown them right out. If you wouldn't know any better, you would think both teams were fighting for the playoffs with how the two fan bases are reacting to every play early on.

12:55 - SABRES GOAL. A very nice team effort by the Buffalo forwards helps result in the first goal of the game and get fans of the blue and gold out of their seats. **Kyle Okposo** to **Tyler Ennis** to **Ryan O'Reilly**, that was the sequence, and would not have happened without the work of the two forwards before O'Reilly's goal. Ennis made a very nice spin move to simply fling the puck to the front of the net. **1-0 BUF.**

10:40 - MAPLE LEAFS GOAL. That is a goal that **Robin Lehner** will want to have back. **Leo Komarov** takes the initial shot on goal that is kicked out into the slot, right there for **Connor Brown** to flip into the top corner of the net. The lead is short lived for Buffalo. **1-1 tie.**

10:15 - SABRES GOAL. Well, this one escalated quickly! **Evander Kane** gives Buffalo the lead right back. It is Kane's 26th goal of the year and another that comes at even strength. **2-1 BUF.**

5:14 - William Carrier makes his presence known as he is back in the lineup after missing time due to an injury. He lays out Jake Gardiner in the corner along the boards in the Toronto zone. This game has everything so far, and it is a fun one to watch.

End of Period

Goal Summary

BUF: 7:05 - Ryan O'Reilly (18) (Tyler Ennis, Kyle Okposo). 9:45 - Evander Kane (26) (Zach Bogosian, Ryan O'Reilly)

TOR: 9:30 - Connor Brown (18)

Penalty Summary

BUF: 11:49 - Kyle Okposo (2 min., hooking). 16:10 - Dmitry Kulikov (2 min., holding)

TOR: 16:10 - Nazem Kadri (2 min., holding the stick)

Shots on Goal

BUF - 16, TOR - 11

Second Period

19:32 - Looks like Mike Babcock is sending a message to his team by changing his goaltenders. Frederik Andersen is out, and Curtis McElhinney is in for Toronto.

17:38 - MAPLE LEAFS GOAL. Another loose puck left near the slot and it results in another Toronto goal. This time **Auston Matthews** is able to handle the loose puck in the offensive zone and re-tie the game. Huge drama here at KeyBank Center. **2-2 tie.**

17:13 - SABRES GOAL. Stop me if you have heards this already tonight. Just seconds after Toronto ties the game, **Jack Eichel** gives Buffalo their third lead of the night. What a pass by **Dmitry Kulikov** on the power play, and the one-time shot by Eichel from the far side point was a thing of beauty. That short power play worked to perfection. **3-2 BUF.**

14:01 - SABRES GOAL. Well, this one is decidedly tilted in Buffalo's favor right now. **Robin Lehner** helps out his own cause by flicking the puck from his crease to the far blue line, **Jack Eichel** is able to cradle the puck and protect it and eventually it reaches **Dmitry Kulikov**. The rear guard leaves no doubt with a bullet from the blue line. **4-2 BUF.**

8:40 - Buffalo has not let up one iota since taking the two-goal lead. They hold the edge in shots 27-15 overall in the game, and this period are outshooting Toronto 11-4.

6:51 - SABRES GOAL. My, how quickly things can change from one end of the ice to the other. Lehner absoltely steals a goal away from Toronto, and at the other end **Jack Eichel** gets his second goal of the night on the next rush. **5-2 BUF.**

2:42 - Marcus Foligno heads to the penalty box for tripping, but he kept a for sure goal from going in the net by doing so. I will take that penalty every day of the week if it keeps the puck out of the net.

End of Period

Goal Summary

BUF: 2:47 - Jack Eichel (22) PPG (Dmitry Kulikov, Kyle Okposo). 5:59 - Dmitry Kulikov (2) (Tyler Ennis, Jack Eichel). 13:12 - Jack Eichel (23) (Sam Reinhart, Justin Falk)

TOR: 2:22 - Auston Matthews (34) (Matt Hunwick, William Nylander)

Penalty Summary

BUF: 17:18 - Marcus Foligno (2 min., tripping)

TOR: 2:38 - Matt Martin (2 min., interference). 4:59 - Jake Gardiner (2 min., hooking)

Shots on Goal

BUF - 16 (32), TOR - 11 (22)

Third Period

17:10 - Kulikov may be playing his best game of the season tonight. He just broke up a 2-on-1 chance after the puck was given up in the defensive zone. Mitch Marner had the chance that did not make it to the net.

14:01 - Lehner once again is playing the puck, this time it results in an icing. I want him playing the puck, but not so much that it gets him and the team in trouble.

6:55 - Buffalo has not crawled into a defensive shell, despite the three-goal lead. Eichel nearly got his hat trick goal on a very nice cross-ice pass by Kane. It would have been the proverbial cherry on top of this one, had the play come to fruition.

3:25 - The seating bowl has been emptying out with so many Leafs fans heading to the exits. Buffalo has played very well against Toronto the last two times the teams have met.

End of Game

Buffalo 5, Toronto 2

Goal Summary

BUF: none

TOR: none

Penalty Summary

BUF: none

TOR: none

Shots on Goal

BUF - 6 (38), TOR - 12 (34)

Post-Game Audio:

5 Observations: Sabres top Maple Leafs 5-2

By Matt Bove

WKBW

March 25, 2017

BUFFALO, N.Y. (WKBW) - Three unanswered goals in the second period were enough to spark the Buffalo Sabres on Saturday night, knocking off the division rival Toronto Maple Leafs 5-2.

Five observations from Saturday's win:

Helluva start

Despite only having a one-goal lead, you would have to imagine the Sabres were happy with how they came out of the gate.

In the first 20 minutes, the Sabres had 16 shots, their most since they peppered the Penguins on March 5 with 21 in the opening period. Lately, the Sabres have had a hard time capitalizing on their chances, so two goals was a great way to start. Remember, this team had only six (!) in their previous five games.

Responding fast

Leafs tie game at 1 -- Sabres regain lead 15 seconds later with Evander Kane goal

Leafs tie game at 2 -- Sabres regain lead with Jack Eichel goal 25 seconds later

Insert motivational quote about getting back up after being knocked down here

When the Maple Leafs looked like they were ready to regain momentum the Sabres stopped them right in their tracks. It was exactly what the home team needed to do, especially with a ton of Maple Leafs fans in the building.

Good hands

Fair or not, Auston Matthews and Jack Eichel will always be compared. I'm not sure which player is better and who will have the better career, I don't know if anyone knows that, but I do know the league is in good hands with superstars like Matthews and Eichel.

Matthews started the party with his 34th goal of the campaign, tying a Maple Leafs record for most goals scored in a season by a rookie. The goal gives Matthews 61 points [34G, 27A] in 74 games this year. Not a bad way to start a career, eh?

Not to be outdone, Eichel blasted home a one-timer on the power play seconds later to give the Sabres a 3-2 lead. Poor Curtis McElhinney, he never stood a chance.

A few minutes later the blue and gold were once again on the power play and once again found the back of the net on a one-timer from Dmitry Kulikov. It looked like the Maple Leafs were going to clear the zone, but Eichel outmuscled a defender to steal the puck and set up the goal.

But wait, there's more! Lightning struck twice for Eichel who netted his 23rd of the season later in the second period. The celebration says it all -- Eichel is sick of being compared to Matthews and the Maple Leafs.

LMFAO would be proud

*"Shots shots shots shots shots shots
Shots shots shots shots shots
Shots shots shots shots shots
Everybody!"*

The guy that yells "SHOOT" in the 300 level would've loved this game. On Saturday the Sabres finished with 38 shots, including 32 after the first 40 minutes.

Shoot to score.

We had ourselves a donnybrook

Saturday's game had everything you'd like: Goals, big saves, huge hits and of course two teams that don't like each other. The only thing that was missing was defense from the Maple Leafs, but who needs that, right?

This isn't so much an observation, but how fun would a playoff series between these two teams be? Toronto may be closer to the playoffs this season but in the new few years, I don't think many around the league would be surprised if these two teams clashed in a playoff series.

Maple Leafs lose, give up ground in Atlantic

By Joe Yerdon

NHL.com

March 25, 2017

BUFFALO -- The Toronto Maple Leafs' lead for third place in the Atlantic Division is down to one point after they lost to the Buffalo Sabres 5-2 at KeyBank Center on Saturday.

Toronto (35-24-15) had won three in a row. The Boston Bruins trail them by one point after defeating the New York Islanders 2-1. The Maple Leafs have one game in hand.

"We weren't very good," Toronto coach Mike Babcock said. "For whatever reason, they were quicker, they were better, they were hungrier. Obviously coming into the game I thought we had more to play for than they did. But pride is a wonderful thing, and if you get your group to dig in like they did tonight, they look good and we didn't. So good for them, and obviously we've got to fix whatever. We weren't good enough. Period."

Jack Eichel scored twice for Buffalo (31-32-12), which is 10 points behind the Bruins for the second wild card into the Stanley Cup Playoffs from the Eastern Conference. The Sabres are 18-2-1 in their past 21 home games against the Maple Leafs.

"We were able to capitalize on our power play," Eichel said. "It's nice to see we also shut them down in the third and stuck with our game plan; a good 60-minute effort."

Maple Leafs forward Auston Matthews scored his NHL-rookie-leading 34th goal to make it 2-2 at 2:22 of the second period.

Eichel gave the Sabres a 3-2 lead 25 seconds later with a power-play goal. His shot went past Maple Leafs goalie Curtis McElhinney after a pass from Dmitry Kulikov. McElhinney replaced starter Frederik Andersen (upper body) to start the period.

"Obviously the other team's doctor thought he should come out of the game, so he came out of the game," Babcock said. "So once our doctor has seen him [Sunday] then I'll have a better handle on what's going on and I'll be able to tell you."

Eichel helped set up Kulikov's second goal of the season, also on the power play, that made it 4-2 at 5:59 of the second. Eichel's second goal, 23rd of the season, made it 5-2 at 13:12 when he beat McElhinney through a screen by Marcus Foligno.

"Great to see [Kulikov] do that," Eichel said. "He makes a great play to me and puts it in my wheelhouse for a goal and then he lets a laser go. We know the type of player that he can be and the skill that he has. That's shot's a real weapon. He did a great job distributing the puck tonight."

Ryan O'Reilly gave the Sabres a 1-0 lead at 7:05 of the first period. After a cross-crease pass from Tyler Ennis, O'Reilly tapped the puck past Andersen for his 18th goal.

Connor Brown made it 1-1 at 9:30. He picked up a rebound of a shot by Leo Komarov and shot it past Robin Lehner for his 18th goal. Evander Kane gave the Sabres a 2-1 lead 15 seconds later with his 26th goal.

Lehner made 32 saves, Andersen made 14, and McElhinney made 19.

Goal of the game

Eichel's second goal gave him his third point. He has 53 points in 54 games this season after he missed the first 21 with an ankle injury.

Save of the game

Lehner stopped Mitchell Marner on a 2-on-1 at 11:38 of the second period.

"They came in fast, I kind of read that he just came around," Lehner said. "I kind of prepared for him to pass it over there and I was happy I got it with my pad."

Highlight of the game

Eichel's first goal was the game-winner after a setup from Kulikov.

"It's fun to score and it's fun to get points," said Kulikov, who has two goals and two assists in 40 games.

Unsung performance of the game

The Maple Leafs power play, which led the NHL, went 0-for-3. Sabres defenseman Zach Bogosian played 3:04 of his 21:24 on the penalty kill and had three blocked shots.

They said it

"It was just fun. There was a lot of energy in the rink right from the start, a lot of emotion, and those are fun games. We haven't had a lot of those games in a while. I think we really felt that energy. I think our fans were really loud and gave us a boost. I think we played with a lot of jump, a lot of energy all game." -- *Sabres forward Tyler Ennis*

Need to know

Matthews tied the Maple Leafs rookie record for goals held by Wendel Clark (1985-86). ... Maple Leafs forward William Nylander extended his point streak to 11 games (four goals, nine assists) with an assist on Matthews' goal. It is one game behind the NHL season high (Mikael Granlund, Minnesota Wild). Eichel also had an 11-game streak this season. ... Maple Leafs forward Nazem Kadri played his 400th NHL game. ... Kulikov played his 500th NHL game.

What's next

Maple Leafs: Host the Florida Panthers on Tuesday (7:30 p.m. ET; TSN4, FS-F, NHL.TV)

Sabres: Host the Florida Panthers on Monday (7 p.m. ET; MSG-B, FS-F, NHL.TV)

Sabres feed off of rivalry's energy in win over Leafs

By Jourdon LaBarber

Buffalo Sabres

March 25, 2017

Being the longest-tenured member of the Buffalo Sabres, Tyler Ennis may be as well-equipped as anyone to discuss the team's rivalry with the Toronto Maple Leafs. It's one that exists in the stands as much as it does on the ice; Toronto fans travel down the QEW to cheer for their team, usually providing a back-and-forth that trickles down onto the ice.

That was as true as ever on Saturday night, with the Maple Leafs coming into town looking to protect their small playoff cushion and the Sabres seeking to play spoiler. Buffalo got the job done, winning 5-2, and a game that began with a mixed crowd cheering back and forth ended with a standing ovation from the Sabres fans with little blue and white left in the building to speak of.

It was the kind of game that left Ennis smiling when he was asked about it afterward.

"I think it was just fun," he said. "I think there was a lot of energy in the rink right from the start, a lot of emotion and those are fun games. We haven't had a lot of those games in a while. I think we really felt that energy. I think our fans were really loud and gave us a boost and I thought we played with a lot of jump and a lot of energy the whole game."

It was the type of game you'd expect between rivals, from the energy in the stands to the two teams trading the first five goals, a trend that ended with both teams' young superstars scoring one after the other. Auston Matthews scored for Toronto to tie the game a mere 2:22 into the second period; Jack Eichel answered with the game-winning goal on the power play 25 seconds later.

Eichel's goal was the first of a three-point night for him, all of which came in the second period. He earned an assist on Dmitry Kulikov's power-play goal at the 5:59 mark of the period and scored another goal of his own less than eight minutes after that.

Ryan O'Reilly (1+1), Kulikov (1+1), Ennis (0+2) and Kyle Okposo (0+2) also had multi-point outings for the Sabres with two points each, while Evander Kane also scored a goal. Robin Lehner was stellar again with a 32-save performance in net.

"It's always fun to play in a building that's loud," Lehner said. "Today was very loud and we don't want them to win. We play them one more time here, we want to win that one too. We don't wish them any success."

Okposo, who was one of four players returning to the Sabres lineup from injury along with Kulikov, Justin Falk and William Carrier, spoke in the morning about how this game would be the type that the young Sabres still need to learn how to win. The Maple Leafs were coming in with points in their last five games and still had everything to lose as they continue to fight for a playoff spot. They were going to be desperate.

The Sabres rose to the occasion right from the start, with O'Reilly netting the first goal 7:05 into the contest. They also showed poise in their ability to respond. When Connor Brown scored on a rush play shortly after O'Reilly's goal, Kane was able to regain the lead for the Sabres with this goal 15 seconds later:

Matthews' goal was a quick reminder of the struggles that Buffalo has faced in second periods, but the Sabres followed it up with one of their best periods of the season. All three goals - the two from Eichel and one from Kulikov - came on one-time shots that flew by Toronto goalie Curtis McElhinney, who had replaced Frederik Andersen to begin the period.

The Sabres also outshot Toronto 16-11 in the period and killed off one of three penalties on a perfect night for the penalty kill. Toronto had begun the night with the League's top power play; by the end of it, Buffalo had reclaimed the top spot.

Eichel was even-keel when speaking after the game, but you could see his emotion on the ice:

"This is our building so obviously we want to play well here," Eichel said. "I think there was a little extra emotion in our game tonight, a little extra motivation and it's good to see. We always want to play well against them, it's obviously a rival and nice to beat them."

And, as Ennis said, it makes for good fun - even if it means dealing with Maple Leafs fans.

"Yeah, that's the fun part," Ennis said with grin. "That's the goal. The goal is to keep them quiet, silence them a little bit, and these Toronto games are always fun."

Kulikov's big night

In what's been a trying first season as a Sabre for Kulikov, this game was certainly a highlight. It was the 500th NHL game for the 26 year old, and his first multi-point outing for Buffalo. He also skated a team-high 23:55 with Rasmus Ristolainen serving the first game of a three-game suspension.

"I think Dmitry's looked really good coming back from his injury," Bylsma said. "The last two days of practice have been his most aggressive and physical and the way he can play and I thought he stepped right into the game and showed that for us tonight. It was a big task, with Risto out of the lineup he was a top pairing playing against their good players."

"He makes a great play to me, puts it in my wheelhouse for a goal and then lets a laser go," Eichel said. "We know the type of player that he can be and the skill that he has and that shot's a real weapon."

Up next

Brian Gionta is expected to play his 1,000th NHL game when the Sabres **host another division rival in the Florida Panthers** at KeyBank Center on Monday night. Buffalo is 1-0-1 against Florida this season, with this being the third of four matchups between the two teams.

Coverage on Monday begins at 6:30 p.m. with the Tops Pregame Show on MSG-B, or you can listen live on WGR 550. The puck drops at 7 p.m.