



# **Buffalo Sabres**

## **Daily Press Clips**

*April 2, 2017*

## **New Sabre C.J. Smith developed a two-way game at UMass-Lowell**

By Amy Moritz

The Buffalo News

March 31, 2017

When one door closes, another opens.

It was a disappointing end to the season for UMass-Lowell. The River Hawks had won the Hockey East Tournament and were ranked fourth in the country, but they fell short of reaching the Frozen Four, losing to Notre Dame in overtime of the Northeast Regional Final.

But opportunity presented itself to C.J. Smith and the junior decided to skip his senior year and sign with the Buffalo Sabres. The forward was among those also making the leap from college hockey to the pros. He joined the Sabres at practice on Thursday. After the team was off on Friday, he is expected back at practice Saturday and should make his pro debut Sunday when the Sabres host the New York Islanders in KeyBank Center.

"He's always been able to score but I think he's developed his two-way game," UMass-Lowell coach Norm Bazin said. "It's not something that came easily. He worked on his play away from the puck and once he continued to work hard on his two-way game, his offense improved.

"His biggest asset is his passion for the game. He loves to play. He seems to get more consistent every year. He's improving with every year and that's a good sign that his upside is yet to be determined."

Of course, Bazin wished he one more season to help Smith develop that upside, but again, the name of the game is seizing opportunities.

"I think from the standpoint of a college coach, you always want the kid to come back and finish a degree and get 30 goals," Bazin said. "But we wish him well. I don't know a lot about Buffalo, but they have a lot of young talent and I think it's a terrific fit. I think C.J. will grow with the organization and be able to be a strong asset."

## **Inside the Sabres: At age 80, hockey is still funny business for Harry Neale**

By John Vogl

The Buffalo News

April 1, 2017

Harry Neale recently turned 80, so I wished him happy birthday.

"Thanks," he said. "I just wish the funeral homes would stop calling me."

Then he told another joke. Then another.

Every place needs someone to provide comic relief. In the Sabres' press box, Neale is the man.

The freshly minted octogenarian and Hall of Fame announcer still blesses Buffalo's arena with his recognizable voice. He's not behind a microphone anymore, but he's a fixture near the broadcast booth. Announcers, scouts, former coaches and current players stop by his seat in KeyBank Center for chats and laughs.

"I've made a lot of good friends," he said. "I know there must be some bad apples in the league, but when I was in the league or broadcasting, I didn't meet very many."

He also never met a banquet table he didn't like. As a marquee figure for "Hockey Night in Canada" during the 1980s and '90s, he'd often get invited to big events. That's where he filled his never-ending joke book.

"Whenever I went to a banquet and I wasn't speaking, I'd steal two of the guy's good jokes," Neale said.

He loves to tell them. The jovial and avuncular Neale remains in high spirits because he feels he's never worked a day in his life.

Ever since he was 7 and skating on the outdoor rink his dad built in Sarnia, Ont., Neale knew he wanted to be in hockey. He didn't play in the NHL like he dreamed, but he won championships in junior, college and senior leagues. He coached in high school, college and the pros, helping guide the Vancouver Canucks to the Stanley Cup finals in 1982 before becoming general manager.

Neale began his broadcasting career in 1986 and it continued for 28 years, including the final six with the Sabres.

"I've often thought how lucky I was that I never really thought I had a 'job' job once I got into hockey because of my passion for the game and enjoying the players," Neale said. "I still like going to the home games. I go up to Toronto occasionally and go to games."

The home games, as they've been since 1987, are in Buffalo. He moved to East Amherst for a couple of reasons. The secondary one was to be close to the "Hockey Night" hub of Toronto and his other job as Maple Leafs announcer.

"The real reason I came to Buffalo was I found out that you get 24 beers for half the price that you could in Canada," he said.

Thankfully, the jokes don't stop. He worked them in while recalling every phase of his life:

\*Neale was a high school teacher during the early 1960s in Hamilton, Ont.

"I thought I was going to be a teacher for the rest of my life. I enjoyed teaching nuclear physics," he said. "No, I enjoyed teaching physical education and social studies."

\*He coached at Ohio State from 1966 to 1970.

"Woody Hayes and I won two Rose Bowls as I recall," Neale said, referring to the legendary football leader.

\*Neale's final coaching stop was in 1985 with the Detroit Red Wings, who fired him at midseason.

"Then I was harder to find than Jimmy Hoffa," Neale said.

\*He spends these nights watching games and listening to other announcers.

"Guys like you got me fired in Buffalo, so now I'm just a fan," he said.

In all seriousness, he's glad he got to spend his final working years with the Sabres. Five of the six were spent next to Rick Jeanneret in the booth. Both have won the Foster Hewitt Memorial Award, an honor presented by the Hockey Hall of Fame to outstanding announcers. Jeanneret won it in 2012, and Neale was honored in 2013.

"That was a bonus beyond belief that I didn't have to travel and I got a chance to work with Rick, which was a pleasure, to say the least," Neale said. "I've got some great memories of every team I've been with. I feel very fortunate that I was able to make a good living doing something that I was able to do since I was 10 years old."

## **Ristolainen ready to return from suspension**

By Paul Hamilton

WGR 550

April 1, 2017

Buffalo, NY (WGR 550) - There was one advantage Rasmus Ristolainen got out of serving his three game NHL suspension, "Yes rest, I got good rest, got a good couple of practices and I'm ready to go. It felt like a month."

Ristolainen is 5th in the league averaging 26:42 per game. The only players that log more ice-time are Erik Karlsson Ott., Ryan Suter Minn., Drew Doughty L.A. and Dustin Byfuglien Winn. Ristolainen is only 47 seconds behind Byfuglien. He said, "I don't like resting, but I can't say it didn't feel good, I got some good sleep, so I feel really fresh right now."

Ristolainen knew it would be hard sitting out three games, but he did say it was harder than he thought it would be, "Yes, I don't really like watching, you can't do much and you want to be there with the guys, so we'll see tomorrow if it was good or bad."

Dan Bylsma's team won two of the three games Ristolainen was out for, but the head coach said he was still missed, "He plays against the other team's best players, power play, penalty killing and 25 to 27 minutes is a lot to miss and him coming back gives us a guy that does all those things for our team ."

Many of the defensemen played quite a few more minutes than they were used to when Ristolainen was in the lineup. Josh Gorges feels the team is starting to play better which helped when number 55 was out, "You look at those three games knowing who we were missing, I think collectively as a team, we played a better all around game."

"I thought our forwards did an unbelievable job of hunting down loose pucks on the forecheck and keeping pucks in the offensive zone, which means we do less work and it makes our job so much easier."

"And then when it came to us, I think we really tried to keep the game simple, we tried to keep our shifts short and just roll."

Kyle Okposo is still sick and has not gotten any better yet so he won't play Sunday. Bylsma said C.J. Smith will make his NHL debut. Saturday's lines were:

Forwards:

Kane - O'Reilly - Ennis

Foligno - Eichel - Reinhart

Smith - Rodrigues - Gionta

Carrier - Girgensons - Moulson

Defense:

McCabe - Ristolainen

Gorges - Kulikov

Falk - Bosgosian

Deslauriers - Franson

Join Brian Koziol at 2 p.m. for Sunday's pregame against the Islanders beginning when he'll be joined by Dan Bylsma, Rasmus Ristolainen, C.J. Smith and Sam Reinhart.

## **Sabres ready to welcome Rasmus Ristolainen back to lineup**

By Bill Hoppe  
Olean Times Herald  
April 1, 2017

BUFFALO – In 74 games this season, defenseman Rasmus Ristolainen has averaged just under 27 minutes of playing time, the Sabres' highest total. All together, the workhorse has spent almost 2,000 minutes on the ice in his fourth NHL campaign.

So while a three-game suspension for hitting Pittsburgh's Jake Guentzel disappointed Ristolainen, 22, the short break from the rigors of a long year was welcomed.

"I got a good rest," Ristolainen said of his absence. "I worked out well, picked up practices and I'm ready to go. It felt like a month."

Ristolainen's ban fell over a four-day stretch. But thanks to a break in the schedule, this afternoon's tilt against the New York Islanders at KeyBank Center will be the Finn's first appearance since March 21.

After 11 days off, Ristolainen's itching for some action.

"I don't like resting," he said Saturday inside HarborCenter. "Obviously, I can't say it didn't feel good. I got some good sleep, a couple days off. So I feel really fresh right now."

A fresh Ristolainen, of course, should help the defense. Still, the group, which has endured a lot of criticism this season, thrived without its top player.

The Sabres went 2-1 without him, allowing seven goals while limiting opponents to an average of 32 shots a game. They had been allowing 35 or more shots most games in March.

Sabres defenseman Josh Gorges said the blue line performed well with Ristolainen suspended because the team "played a better all-around game."

"Our forwards did an unbelievable job these last three games of hunting down loose pucks on the forecheck, keeping pucks in the offensive zone, which means we do less work, which is always great as a defenseman," he said. "It makes our job so much easier."

"Then when it came to us, I think we really just tried to keep the game simple. We tried to keep our shifts short, get everyone involved and just roll."

But what else is vital to the defense's success?

"Communicating is probably the biggest part for us," Sabres defenseman Cody Franson said.

Yes, simply talking on the ice often buoys the Sabres.

"When we're quiet, we're a half-second late," Franson said. "We aren't as smooth breaking pucks out of our own end. When we're talking, it makes a world of difference. ... It's something we've worked on and continuously gotten better at, and I think we do a better job in managing the puck because of that."

The defense also barely missed Ristolainen because his absence created opportunities. For example, defenseman Dmitry Kulikov, a colossal disappointment as he battled injuries for months, enjoyed a bigger role.

"Kulikov did a nice job jumping in on the top power-play unit and did a nice job with Risto out of there," Sabres coach Dan Bylsma said. "(It) gave an opportunity for other guys to play a little bit more minutes in different situations."

Kulikov suffered a lower-back bruise during the preseason, the first big defense injury in what has become a seemingly unending string. Other than Ristolainen, every regular defender has been hurt this season.

Franson, out the last five games with a hyperextended joint, has been practicing. However, he told the Times Herald he won't play this afternoon. The Sabres don't want him to play back-to-back games right away, so he plans to return Monday against Toronto.

If Franson dresses against the Maple Leafs and the other five defensemen stay healthy, it would be only the 18th time all season the team's regular six have played together.

"We've done a good job of facing adversity when guys go down," Franson said. "When we're healthy, I think we got one of the better back ends out there. I think we've got some experience. I think we've got some younger guys who are doing some great things."

Now that Ristolainen can play again, Gorges doesn't want the Sabres to change anything.

"Recently it's been four lines playing, six D rolling, goaltending's doing their job and we're just playing simple, smart hockey," he said. "There's no secret to it. We're not doing anything fancy."

## **Sabres rookie C.J. Smith ready for NHL debut**

By Bill Hoppe

Olean Times Herald

April 1, 2017

BUFFALO – Thursday, Sabres newcomer C.J. Smith's first day in the NHL, was "extremely overwhelming," the rookie winger said.

"I didn't get to soak it in as much as I wanted to," Smith said Saturday inside HarborCenter.

Smith signed his entry-level contract in the morning, practiced with his new teammates shortly after and had to take a test online – the finance major is still enrolled at UMass Lowell, where he spent three seasons – in the afternoon.

Smith, 22, will probably soak everything in today. A week after playing his final college game, Smith will make his NHL debut this afternoon against the New York Islanders at KeyBank Center.

The 5-foot-11 winger practiced beside center Evan Rodrigues and captain Brian Gionta on Saturday.

"(I've) really kind of noted his puck skills and his tenaciousness on the puck," Sabres coach Dan Bylsma said of Smith. "He's not a big guy. He's not going to be fooling anyone out there with his size. I've liked the way in practices he's competed on pucks and been tenacious on pucks."

Smith, by the way, said he got a 90 on his test.

Meanwhile, Bylsma said winger Kyle Okposo, sidelined with the flu last game, is still sick and will miss the contest against the Islanders, his former team.

The Islanders will be without star center John Tavares, who's week-to-week after suffering a hamstring injury Friday.

## **Rested Rasmus Ristolainen ready to return to Sabres**

By Bill Hoppe  
Olean Times Herald  
April 1, 2017

BUFFALO – For Sabres defenseman Rasmus Ristolainen, his three-game suspension meant he received a short break from the rigors of a long season.

“I got a good rest,” Ristolainen said of his absence. “I worked out well, picked up practices and I’m ready to go. It felt like a month.”

Ristolainen’s ban for hitting Pittsburgh’s Jake Guentzel is over. The workhorse will return for Sunday afternoon’s home tilt against the New York Islanders.

While the rest felt good, Ristolainen didn’t want it.

“I don’t like resting,” he said this morning inside HarborCenter. “Obviously, I can’t say it didn’t feel good. I got some good sleep, a couple days off. So I feel really fresh right now.”

The Sabres will make at least one other lineup change Sunday. Coach Dan Bylsma said newcomer C.J. Smith, who signed a two-year contract Thursday, will make his NHL debut.

The 5-foot-11 winger skated beside center Evan Rodrigues and captain Brian Gionta today.

“(I’ve) really kind of noted his puck skills and his tenaciousness on the puck,” Bylsma said of Smith. “He’s not a big guy. He’s not going to be fooling anyone out there with his size. I’ve liked the way in practices he’s competed on pucks and been tenacious on pucks.”

Bylsma said winger Kyle Okposo, sidelined with the flu last game, is still sick and will miss Sunday’s game.

Meanwhile, while defenseman Cody Franson (hyperextended joint) has been practicing, he told the Times Herald he plans to return Monday against Toronto. The Sabres don’t want to force him into back-to-back games.

## **Commitment to defense helped C.J. Smith reach Sabres**

By Bill Hoppe  
Olean Times Herald  
April 1, 2017

BUFFALO – After C.J. Smith led UMass Lowell in goal scoring for the third consecutive season, River Hawks coach Norm Bazin knew his star forward would have opportunities to turn pro.

Smith, who signed a two-year contract with the Sabres on Thursday, enjoyed a huge 2016-17 campaign, scoring 23 goals and 51 points in only 41 games.

But something besides Smith's scoring prowess helped him morph from an undrafted youngster into an NHL prospect in his junior season.

Smith, 22, developed into a complete, 200-foot player. He generated offense without shirking his defensive responsibilities.

"Somebody establishing himself as a very dependable, responsible defensive (player) without negotiating offense, there's no question they're going to have opportunities to go forward," Bazin told the Times Herald by phone Thursday, hours after Smith inked his entry-level deal.

That should help Smith at the next level. The modern NHL is an ultra-tight, systems-oriented league. The best offense is usually a good defense.

"He understood that the better defensively he plays, the better off he gets," Bazin said.

Smith, who grew up in Des Moines, Iowa, believes he will be better off in Buffalo. He had a slew of teams after him in free agency, but he said Thursday he identifies with the city's blue-collar mentality.

"He likes to work," Bazin said. "He's got a passion to play. One of the most endearing parts about C.J. is he loves to play and he loves to be at the rink and he's always got a smile on, and that's contagious.

"The blue-collar thing, yeah, he is from blue-collar roots. We're certainly a blue-collar program."

The 5-foot-11, 185-pound Smith, of course, developed in other ways during his three NCAA seasons.

"You get a little thicker, he's getting more explosive," Bazin said.

But passion might be the underlying trait that helped the affable Smith reach the NHL.

"I've learned he's a very driven guy," Bazin said. "There's a lot of nice kids, but they don't necessarily know how to play. So he's a driven kid and he's passionate to get better every day. That's the kid I know."

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After going pointless in Tuesday's 3-1 loss in Columbus, Sabres center Jack Eichel has 23 goals and 55 points in 56 outings, meaning he's just one goal and one point short of equaling the totals from his 81-game rookie campaign.

The Sabres haven't had a point-per game player since Thomas Vanek compiled 41 points in 38 appearances during the lockout-shortened 2012-13 season. Derek Roy, who had 81 points in 78 games in 2007-08, was the Sabres' last point-per game player in a full season.

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The Sabres had Friday off. They host the New York Islanders on Sunday afternoon.

## **C.J. Smith sees fit with Sabres, Buffalo**

By Bill Hoppe  
Olean Times Herald  
April 1, 2017

BUFFALO – As a speedy forward fresh off a 23-goal, 51-point junior season, Sabres newcomer C.J. Smith had plenty of suitors earlier this week after he decided to leave UMass Lowell and turn pro.

So why did Smith, 22, ultimately sign a two-year, entry-level contract with the Sabres? The city certainly played a factor.

“It just kind of fits the person I am,” Smith said Thursday following his first NHL practice. “I grew up in Des Moines, Iowa, a blue-collar city, played in Lowell, (Mass.) and played in Austin, Minnesota, all kind of blue-collar communities and they all play blue-collar hockey. I think that’s kind of what the Buffalo Sabres are about. I think I kind of fit their identity.”

The 5-foot-11, 185-pound Smith signed Thursday morning and was on the KeyBank Center ice with his new teammates by 11:30 a.m., capping a whirlwind few days.

Notre Dame eliminated UMass Lowell from the NCAA Tournament on Sunday. Smith said he sat down with his coach and discussed his future Monday.

Smith said he left school because he wanted to gain “more experience playing against bigger guys.”

“I think I can hold my own against (these) guys,” he said.

Smith talked to teams by phone Tuesday before making his decision Wednesday. He said Sabres general manager Tim Murray helped convince him to pick Buffalo.

“I talked to quite a few guys, but Tim had a heavy influence on me coming here,” he said.

Smith flew out and arrived in Buffalo, a city he had never visited, about 5 p.m. Wednesday.

Thursday’s practice was “pretty surreal,” he said.

“You’re looking at guys like Jack Eichel, Matt Moulson, (Brian) Gionta – guys you grew up watching,” Smith said. “It’s pretty unbelievable.”

He added: “There’s a ... young core in here that’s going to grow this program.”

Smith’s path to the NHL has been long. He went undrafted and spent three years in junior before joining UMass Lowell in 2014-15.

He improved each NCAA season, upping his goal and point totals. This year, he led the River Hawks in goals and ranked second in points, setting new career highs in 41 games. He compiled 56 goals and 125 points in 120 appearances over three seasons.

“I got speed, skill,” Smith said, “but I just also play a hard game, play a heavy game coming from Lowell. A heavy, puck-possession game is my identity and who I am.”

Smith said his “play away from the puck” helped him reach a new level in 2016-17.

“I had some success (in my) freshman and sophomore year,” he said. “I put some pucks in the net. But I think being able to be a 200-foot player and playing away from the puck really grew my game and actually helped me have more offense this year.”

Of course, that scoring prowess might not translate to the NHL. But his other skills should be visible whenever Smith debuts for the Sabres, who don't play again until Sunday.

"It's a fresh, young-looking face in that helmet," Sabres coach Dan Bylsma said. "C.J.'s coming with speed and skill, with some jump in his game and has demonstrated that with UMass Lowell, especially this year. But (125) points in 120 college games is pretty impressive."

Bylsma likes Smith's combination of speed and tenacity.

"Just want to see him get in the mix and see what he could do when he gets in a game," he said.

Smith has some familiarity with the Sabres. UMass Lowell is in Hockey East, so he competed against Eichel and center Evan Rodrigues when they played for Boston University two years ago.

Smith knows Sabres prospect Cal Petersen, Notre Dame's No. 1 goalie and captain, from Iowa. They played summer hockey together and "are pretty good buddies," he said.

Petersen, one of the NCAA's top goalies, could leave school soon. While Smith already left, he isn't done with college yet. Shortly after talking to the media, the finance major had to take a test online.

"We introduced him to the team," Bylsma said. "We told him that afterwards, in addition to his 2 o'clock test, he'd have to remember all the guys' names. His head's kind of spinning. He's ... got a lot going on. But that's an exciting thing for him."

## Isles begin last-gasp playoff chase without Tavares

Yahoo Sports

April 2, 2017

In what has been a difficult season and with time running out, the New York Islanders will have to get around a roadblock at the worst possible time in a last-ditch effort to secure a playoff spot.

With leading scorer and captain John Tavares out for the foreseeable future, the Islanders open a four-game road trip Sunday against the Buffalo Sabres.

While still mathematically in the mix, the Islanders' chances of a third straight playoff appearance are slim. New York (36-29-12) and Carolina trail Boston by six points for the eighth and final Eastern Conference playoff spot. The Islanders and Hurricanes each have five games remaining and the Bruins have four.

To make postseason plans, the Islanders must figure out a way to win without Tavares, who leads the team with 66 points (28 goals, 38 assists) in 77 games.

Tavares suffered an apparent lower-body injury, clutching the back of his left leg, with 3:14 to play in a 2-1 win over the New Jersey Devils on Friday that snapped a three-game losing streak.

"It's not a great scenario ... John is a huge engine and plays every single situation we've asked. It's a big blow any time you see your best player go down," said Islanders coach Doug Weight, who has posted a 19-12-4 record since taking over for the fired Jack Capuano.

The league's official website posted Saturday that Tavares will be out on a "week-to-week" basis.

With Tavares sidelined, the Islanders may look to Anders Lee (29 goals) and Andrew Ladd (21 goals) to pick up the slack. New York has six other players with at least 11 goals.

"Injuries happen. It's not fun, but it gives somebody a chance, right?" Weight told the league's official website. "It's going to give some more minutes to throw around, some big challenges at a good time of the year."

After this game, the Isles head to Nashville, Carolina and New Jersey before closing the regular season April 9 at home against Ottawa.

Buffalo (32-33-12) is playing out the string after failing to reach the postseason for the sixth straight year and searching for its fourth win in five games at KeyBank Center. The Sabres return home to open their final homestand of the season after falling 2-1 to the Columbus Blue Jackets on Tuesday.

The Sabres will welcome back defenseman Rasmus Ristolainen after he served a three-game suspension for a hit on Jake Guentzel of the Pittsburgh Penguins on March 21.

"I don't like resting, but obviously I can't say it didn't feel good," Ristolainen told The Buffalo News. "I got some good sleep, a couple of days off, so I feel really fresh right now."

Ristolainen leads the Sabres with 39 assists and is fifth on the club with 44 points. His goal 42 seconds into overtime lifted the Sabres to a 3-2 win over the Islanders on Dec. 16 in western New York.

Though Buffalo's Jack Eichel is winding down an injury-shortened second season, it still can be considered a success that he could eclipse the numbers he put up after being selected second overall in the 2015 NHL Draft.

A high ankle sprain kept Eichel out until his season debut in late November and limited him to 56 games. Despite that, Eichel still leads the club with 55 points (23 goals, 32 assists). In 81 games as a rookie, Eichel led the team with 24 goals and was second with 56 points.

However, he has failed to record a point in two matchups with the Isles this season and has just two assists in five career games against them.

If Robin Lehner gets the start in goal for the Sabres, he'll try to continue his strong play. In his last four games at home, Lehner is 3-1-0 and has allowed just seven goals.

## **With Okposo ill, Smith to make NHL debut on Sunday**

By Jourdon LaBarber

Buffalo Sabres

April 1, 2017

We've already covered the busy first day in the NHL for C.J. Smith, one that included signing his entry-level contract, taking a physical, participating in his first professional practice and then, to top it all off, taking an online exam an hour later.

It was so much, Smith barely had a chance to enjoy it.

"It was extremely overwhelming," Smith said. "I didn't really get to soak it in as much as I would've liked to but yeah, it was awesome."

He'll have another chance to soak in what might be an even more memorable day on Sunday. With Kyle Okposo still under the weather and unable to dress against his former team, Smith will make his NHL debut against the New York Islanders at KeyBank Center.

If the last two practices are any indication, he'll begin his career playing on the left wing alongside Evan Rodrigues and Brian Gionta.

"It's going to be a really good opportunity for him to show what he can do and what he is," Sabres coach Dan Bylsma said. "We've seen him the last two days in practice, the last two practices. He's got some speed and jump to his game, agility. I think we've really kind of noted his puck skills and his tenaciousness on the puck."

"He's not a big guy and he's not going to be fooling anyone out there with his size but I've liked the way in the practices he's competed on pucks and been tenacious on pucks and think that's going to be a big part of his game."

Smith is listed at 5-feet-11-inches tall and 185 pounds, but describes his style of play as "blue collar." He scored 125 points in 120 NCAA games at UMass Lowell, but his willingness to battle is as much a part of his game as his scoring touch.

"I like to just play a tenacious game," Smith said. "Whatever happens, I'm just going to go out there and compete and play hard."

If he's anywhere near as successful on his first NHL test as he was on that online exam on Thursday, he should be fine.

"I did good," he said, smiling. "I got a 90 on it."

### Ristolainen set to return

Prior to serving his three-game suspension over the past week, it had been nearly two full years since Rasmus Ristolainen had missed an NHL game. Needless to say for a guy who prides himself on playing big minutes, the time off felt unfamiliar.

"I got good rest," he said. "I worked out well, a good couple of practices and ready to go. It felt like a month."

As much as he disliked having to take the time off, Ristolainen did admit the rest did him well. He said he feels "fresh" as he prepares to make his return to the lineup against the Islanders on Sunday, joining a defensive corps that has managed itself well in his absence.

"I think collectively as a team we played a better all-around game," defenseman Josh Gorges said. "I think our forwards did an unbelievable job these last few games with hunting down loose pucks on the forecheck, keeping pucks in the offensive zone, which means we do less work ... and then when it came to us, I think we really just tried to keep the game simple, we tried to keep our shifts short, get everyone involved and just rolled."

The Sabres only have five games remaining this season, but Ristolainen said he's still looking to make the most of them.

"I hope to play my best games this year," Ristolainen said, "and like I said I feel fresh so I'm looking forward to it."

Lines at practice

9 Evander Kane - 90 Ryan O'Reilly - 63 Tyler Ennis  
82 Marcus Foligno - 15 Jack Eichel - 23 Sam Reinhart  
49 C.J. Smith - 71 Evan Rodrigues - 12 Brian Gionta  
48 William Carrier - 28 Zemgus Girgensons - 26 Matt Moulson

29 Jake McCabe - 55 Rasmus Ristolainen  
77 Dmitry Kulikov - 47 Zach Bogosian  
4 Josh Gorges - 41 Justin Falk  
44 Nicolas Deslauriers - 6 Cody Franson

40 Robin Lehner  
31 Anders Nilsson