



Buffalo Sabres

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Sabres embarrassed they haven't given fans good times

By John Vogl

The Buffalo News

April 4, 2017

The Sabres and their fans say goodbye Wednesday. Will it be a fond farewell? Good riddance? Or, like many other nights, will the sides barely acknowledge each other?

As the players prepared for the home finale against Montreal, they reflected on the folks who regularly journey to KeyBank Center. The Sabres recognize fun times have been lacking in the Buffalo sports world.

They're sorry for contributing to it.

"They're very supportive fans," goaltender Robin Lehner said Tuesday. "They deserve better. They deserve better than what they've got."

The Sabres will head into the game with the 23rd-best home record in the NHL. They're 19-15-6 with 105 goals for and 110 goals against. Last season, they went 16-19-6.

"It's been a mediocre two years," center Jack Eichel said. "More than anything, it's a bit disappointing, a bit embarrassing for us as players that we can't be better for them. You want to please the fans because of all they've been through and all they continue to put up with. You just want to be better."

After nights like Monday, it's easy to think the Sabres don't care. They had one of the worst opening periods in who knows how long, getting outshot, 18-2, while falling into a 3-0 hole. The 4-2 loss to Toronto had "run for the bus" written all over it.

But the Sabres insist they do care. They say they want to make up for it. They've seen sections of empty seats in other arenas, yet that's not the case in Buffalo. The fans may not be the loudest – primarily because they don't have much to cheer for – but they show up night after night.

"Pretty loyal to us, obviously," Eichel said. "If we don't play well, they're here. Play good, they're here. Play bad, they're here."

"I've got nothing but great things to say about these fans."

The no-show against the Maple Leafs, Buffalo's third straight loss, put the players in a quiet, discouraged mood. If they multiply Tuesday's feeling with six seasons of no hockey playoffs and 17 years without a meaningful football game, they'll have an idea of what the fan base is experiencing.

"They just want to win," defenseman Jake McCabe said. "That's what it comes down to. Between us and the Bills, there's obviously a huge playoff drought. I don't know how many years the Bills haven't made the playoffs. For us, we're going on six."

"If I'm a fan base, I'm frustrated as well. We're all frustrated in here. It's no fun being out of a playoff spot. I understand the frustration."

The home finale is typically a fun event. Players hand season-ticket holders the jerseys off their back and announce their winners for team MVP, Rookie of the Year, Unsung Hero and Man of the Year. Plane rides, pizzas, sunglasses, caps and a raffle prize of at least \$25,000 will be given away.

It will all be meaningless if the Sabres play like they did Monday.

"You just saw it, you just felt it coming out from puck drop," Lehner said. "I felt they came out with a goal, and we didn't really have one. Skilled team over there, good players, and they came out with a goal. It was a pretty ugly one."

Added defenseman Rasmus Ristolainen: "What happened in that first period, we can't let that ever happen again."

It sounds good. But the Sabres have been good with words all year. They've got one last chance to show the home crowd they can back them up.

"Thanks to all of them for supporting us throughout the year," Eichel said. "We've got one left, and we'll just put it all out there for them and try to win a hockey game and try to bring some excitement to the building."

Sabres Notebook: Olympic thoughts; Okposo still ill

By John Vogl

The Buffalo News

April 4, 2017

Jack Eichel traveled to Innsbruck, Austria, to be part of the 2012 Youth Olympic Games, and he was blown away. More than 1,000 athletes from 69 countries gathered in the Alps for an unforgettable 10-day experience.

"The entire city we were in was completely transformed for the event," Eichel said Tuesday. "To think of how special that event was and how good it was, just to imagine what the Olympics is like, it's probably that multiplied by 100."

As of now, the Sabres center will just have to guess what the Olympics are like. The NHL has declared it's not going to South Korea in 2018. Eichel, who was likely to represent the United States, is disappointed by the decision.

"It's something the whole world looks forward to, us included," Eichel said in KeyBank Center. "In terms of trying to grow our game, I think it could have been a good opportunity for us and usually is. I think it's a good way to bring our country together."

"It's tough. You grow up watching and get to the point of playing professionally, and then it kind of goes away. A little bit sad."

Other Buffalo players affected by the decision echoed Eichel's comments.

"It's unfortunate," said defenseman Dmitry Kulikov, who played for Russia in the World Cup. "It's not only every hockey player's dream, but every athlete wants to go to the Olympics and represent their countries. I think it's a huge honor, and it's unfortunate that NHL players are going to miss out on such a great event."

"I just think it's the wrong decision."

Goaltender Robin Lehner was 14 years old when his Swedish countrymen won gold in the 2006 Olympic Games. He also believes the NHL is missing an opportunity to grow the game.

"It's something I think everyone follows," Lehner said. "That's the biggest sporting event in the world. When the Olympics are on, I watch a lot of sports that I'd never seen before, and I think it's pretty cool. I think it's the same way for hockey, you know? People that really haven't followed hockey get to tune in and become fans of a new sport."

Forward Zemgus Girgensons represented Latvia in the 2014 Olympics. His country didn't qualify for the next Games, so he was hesitant to weigh in.

"Just being around all those athletes and seeing the Olympics and being part of it is definitely something special," he said. "At the end, it's business. It's their decision. It's nothing we really can affect right now."

There are plenty of players pushing back. Russian star Alex Ovechkin reiterated Tuesday he plans to leave the Washington Capitals during the Olympics and represent his country. He's hopeful a deal can be salvaged.

Sabres coach Dan Bylsma sees both sides of the argument.

"I have a feeling about the Olympics from both a fan's perspective and a coach's perspective," Bylsma said. "Most of my feelings are from a fan perspective. I think the Olympics is the best tournament in the world, and I like it when the best players are playing in the best tournament in the world."

"As an NHL coach and team-wise, it's stuck in the middle of your season. It's a three-week break. It condenses the rest of the schedule. I wish there was some way it could not be right in the middle of a season and what it does to the season, even what it does to your players that go over and play.

"I'm somewhat disappointed that the best players aren't going to be playing in the best tournament, but I also understand it from the league side and the coaches' side where it's a tough tournament to send your players to and play in."

Kyle Okposo will miss his fourth straight game Wednesday when the Sabres host Montreal. The right winger has a mysterious illness that has lingered for a week.

"Kyle's still dealing with sickness and illness," Bylsma said. "He has gone through some testing with our docs just trying to get more information about it."

Bylsma had no further information. He said earlier in the week it's not mumps, which has hit several NHL players.

C.J. Smith and Alex Nylander made their NHL debuts the past two games. That meant two forwards had to come out. It's not an easy scenario for the scratched players who've been here all year, including Matt Moulson on Monday.

Like Smith, defenseman Jake McCabe was once the late-season college signee.

"I was in the same shoes as C.J., and it's not the easiest thing coming into a room after college," McCabe said. "Guys obviously aren't the happiest right now with the spot we're in, and unfortunately guys are going to have to come out of the lineup, too.

"They just need to understand that they can play at this level and what it takes to play at this level on a consistent basis."

Sabres players think NHL should stay in Olympics

By Bill Hoppe

Olean Times Herald

April 4, 2017

BUFFALO – Having led Team USA at the Sochi Games in 2014, Dan Bylsma has what he called a “feeling about the Olympics” as both a coach and a fan.

“Most of my feelings are from a fan perspective,” the Sabres coach said today, a day after the NHL announced its players wouldn’t be participating in the 2018 Pyeongchang Games.

As a fan, Bylsma said he likes “it when the best players are playing in the best tournament in the world.”

As a coach, though, Bylsma understands how difficult the Olympics can be for the NHL and its teams. The season must be halted for three weeks. Star players can get injured or return worn out. The NHL schedule also becomes condensed and tougher.

“I’m somewhat disappointed the best players aren’t going to be playing in the best tournament, but I also understand it from the league’s side and from the coaches’ side,” Bylsma said following practice inside KeyBank Center. “It’s a tough tournament to send your players to.”

Still, players don’t care. They want to go badly, even if they must travel to South Korea.

The NHL Players’ Association lashed out at the NHL’s decision, saying in a statement, “The players are extraordinarily disappointed and adamantly disagree with the NHL’s shortsighted decision to not continue our participation in the Olympics.”

The NHL, which has argued it deserves some of the International Olympic Committee’s revenue, has participated in every Winter Olympics since 1998.

Of course, Sabres center Jack Eichel, who would’ve been surefire pick for Team USA, wants NHL talent to stay in the Olympics.

“It’s a little bit disappointing ... as a player who takes pride in representing his country and who’s done it before,” he said. “I think I can only speak for myself, I think it’s something the players in the NHL look forward to, and as a young kid just breaking into the league, it’s something I definitely watched growing up and looked forward to every year.”

Eichel believes the Olympics help grow hockey around the world.

“The World Cup was a great experience (in September), but in terms of hockey, it’s obviously really popular in North America, especially places like Toronto, where the World Cup was held,” he said. “To be able to play the game in other continents, other places, allow them to see how exciting and what type of game we play, it’s a good opportunity.

“I can’t comment on the NHL’s decision. I know there’s probably guys who are frustrated with it and a little bit disappointed.”

Each Olympics, Sabres goalie Robin Lehner said he watches sports he has never seen before. The Swede figures a lot of non-hockey followers tune in, see the game’s best players and become fans of the sport.

“It’s unfortunate,” he said.

Sabres defenseman Dmitry Kulikov, a Russian, added: "It's a huge honor. It's unfortunate NHL players are going to miss out on such a great event."

Sabres grateful for fans' rabid support

By Bill Hoppe
Olean Times Herald
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BUFFALO – Instead of securing that long-awaited playoff spot, the Sabres have stumbled, even regressed this season, again cementing their status as one of the NHL's bottom-feeders.

This was, of course, supposed to be the year the drought ended. The Sabres would earn their first postseason berth since 2011. The tank, the years of suffering would finally pay dividends, right?

Well, it hasn't worked out for the Sabres, who have three games left this season, starting with tonight's home finale against the Montreal Canadiens, "Fan Appreciation Night."

The Sabres can be maddening to watch. They often beat some of the NHL's best teams. They also regularly fall to lightweights. They showcase little consistency and have a disturbing penchant for blowing leads.

Many fan bases would've abandoned a perennial loser years ago. But in Buffalo, KeyBank Center is still packed most nights, as it has been for years.

The Sabres have played to 95 percent capacity at home this season, averaging 18,125 fans a game. They have 10 sellouts.

"It's a pretty full building every time we're here," Sabres goalie Robin Lehner said Tuesday following practice. "They're very supportive fans. They deserve better than what they've got. You can't give up, you can't lay down and give up. ... It's what this ... city deserves."

The Sabres, who say they understand their fans' frustrations, believe they enjoy special support.

"They're some of the most loyal bunch I've been associated with," Sabres coach Dan Bylsma said. "They've been with us through thick and thin and with us the whole way."

Center Jack Eichel said it's "disappointing," even "embarrassing" the Sabres haven't performed better for their fans.

"You want to please the fans because of all they've been through and all they continue to put up with," he said. "You still want to be better. It's disappointing our season's ending like this."

The Sabres, losers of three straight contests, rank seventh in the Atlantic Division, just 32-35-12. They're only 19-15-6 at home. With only 76 points, they must win out to surpass last year's total of 81.

They might've hit rock bottom in Monday's 4-2 loss to Toronto, their fiercest rival, falling behind 3-0 to the Maple Leafs just 5:09 into the game.

In other cities, the Sabres would be playing inside a half-empty rink.

"Pretty loyal to us, obviously," Eichel said of the fans. "Sellout games, we don't play well, they're here. We play good, they're here. We play bad, they're here. ... I got nothing but great things to say about these fans. They've been nothing but great to us, nothing but great to me, my family, all my friends. Whenever they're in town, they treat them great.

"Myself, it's been a mediocre two years."

But the mediocrity started long before Eichel arrived. The Sabres haven't played a home playoff game since April 24, 2011, a stretch of 2,173 days.

"If I'm the fan base, I'm frustrated as well," Sabres defenseman Jake McCabe said. "We're all frustrated in here. It's no fun being out of a playoff spot. I understand frustration."

Eichel noted Sunday afternoon's 4-2 loss to the New York Islanders, a meaningless game, was sold out.

"There's 19,000 people here," he said. "I'm sure that if we were in other cities it wouldn't be the same case. You got to appreciate that as a player. It's a lot better than coming here to an empty building."

The building should be full tonight, although many (or even most) fans will be cheering for the Canadiens, who have clinched the Atlantic Division title.

Eichel wants one more opportunity to put on a show for Sabres fans.

"Thanks to all of them to supporting us throughout the year," he said. "We've got one game left, and just put it all out there for them and try to win a hockey game and bring some excitement in the building."

Still, the Sabres have played some exciting games this season, including a slew in Buffalo. Their 5-2 win over the Leafs before a raucous bipartisan crowd March 25 might've been the most thrilling.

"They like when we play Toronto and like when we beat Toronto," Bylsma said of the fans.

McCabe said the Sabres have "shown glimpses of really, really good hockey."

"We've beat some really good teams this year," he said. "But it's been a .500 hockey club. We'll have good games, we'll have bad games, we'll win three in a row, we'll lose three in a row. We'll win one, lose one. It's the inconsistency factor."

Bylsma reserved about his future with Sabres

WGR 550

April 4, 2017

With three games remaining in the 2016-17 season and already out of playoff contention, the Buffalo Sabres are now shifting their focus towards looking ahead at the future before beginning the offseason on Monday.

After an offseason of higher expectations, the Sabres came up flat this season with a current 32-35-12 record and just 76 points in the standings. This after strong finish to the end of the 2015-16 season, where the Sabres went 15-10-7 after the All-Star break and finished with 81 points.

Since the Sabres' five-day bye week in late February, Buffalo has gone 6-11-2 and fell out of any potential playoff race. The Sabres have struggled with injuries all season, however the team has, at times, drastically under-performed with the assets currently on the roster.

This has put the status of Sabres head coach Dan Bylsma job into question.

"Coming into this season on Day 1 when Jack [Eichel] got injured for the first 21 games, that certainly played a big part into it," Bylsma said with Howard Simon and Jeremy White in his final Tuesday visit on WGR. "I thought our team fought through the injuries, and Jack wasn't the only one. Evander [Kane] went down for three weeks with the broken ribs and Ryan [O'Reilly] was out for a portion of the first 50 games. Our team battled through that and was in that mix right around that playoff mark. We had opportunities several times throughout the year... if we had won those games, it would have put us above those teams and right around the playoff line which we were fighting for through 50 games."

"We go into the break still in that fight, we win four of six and we're two points behind. Then we come out of the break, we're still in that fight and kind of where we think we'd hoped to be. We had the four games where we gave up the lead either in the second or third period that really put a dent in our position in the standings. You come out of the break and lose to Pittsburgh being up 3-0, you lose to Arizona being up 2-0 in the third, you lose to Nashville here at home being up 4-2 in the third. Not winning those games, not getting those six points put us in the position where we are now."

Bylsma signed a five-year deal in the spring of 2015 to become the 17th head coach in franchise history. After just two years with the Sabres, the questions are piling up as to whether or not he has potentially lost control of his locker room.

When the season officially ends on Sunday in Tampa Bay, Florida, the evaluation process will begin starting with general manager Tim Murray on down. Bylsma will expect the process with Murray to go just the same as Murray's evaluation goes with the Pegulas and the players' with the entire staff.

"I think we had expectations and goals, not only for wins and losses but where we wanted to go and progress as a team," Bylsma said. "That evaluation at the end of the year will be a fair one."

As for Bylsma's relationship with Murray, it has been stated numerous times that the two talk constantly on just about anything to do with the team. If the Sabres were to move on from Bylsma at the end of the season, the move could be made from Murray himself. But as of right now, it remains status quo between the head coach and the general manager.

"Tim and I talk and communicate throughout the days and weeks," Bylsma said. "We've talked about the future going forward, we've talked about our team, we've talked about our players. That's where it stands and that's where I'm at with that."

Sabres hope to rebound for fans in final home game

By Jourdon LaBarber

Buffalo Sabres

April 4, 2017

Robin Lehner said he could feel it right from puck drop. The Buffalo Sabres simply didn't have the same gear that the Toronto Maple Leafs had to begin their game on Monday night, and what followed was a first period that Lehner said was as bad any they've had all season.

By the time six minutes had passed in the game, the Sabres already trailed 3-0 and Lehner had been pulled.

"They came out with a goal and we didn't really have one," Lehner said. "It's a skilled team over there, good players and they came out with a goal."

Buffalo's goal on Wednesday night, which will be Fan Appreciation Day at KeyBank Center, is to not let a performance like that one be the last thing their fans see from them this season. The game against the Montreal Canadiens will conclude their home schedule.

"As far as I know, it's a pretty full building every time we're here," Lehner said. "They're very supportive fans. They deserve better. They deserve better than what they've got. We can't give up, we can't lie down and give up. You've got to keep working. You've got to keep going towards the goal and get better as a team. It's what this town and this city deserves."

Jack Eichel pointed to a game against the New York Islanders on Sunday as an example of that support. It was a Sunday afternoon in which the Sabres had already been eliminated from the postseason and the Islanders were just barely clinging on to their own playoff aspirations, and yet the game was a sellout.

"I've got nothing but great things to say about these fans," he said. "They're nothing but great to us, nothing but great to me. My family, all my friends, whenever they're in town they treat them great. It's been a mediocre two years and for them to continue to support us and be behind us, selling games out ... I'm sure that if we were in other cities it wouldn't be the same case so you've got to appreciate that as a player."

He continued: "More than anything it's a bit disappointing and a bit embarrassing for us as players that we can't be better for them. You want to please the fans because of all they've been through and all they continue to put with. You want to be better. It's disappointing that our season is ending like this ... We've got one game left [to] just put it all out there for them and try to win a hockey game and bring some excitement into the building."

Coverage of the game on Wednesday begins at 7 p.m. on MSG-B. The puck drops at 7:30.

Tuesday's practice

Now a full week after he was forced to miss the Sabres' game in Columbus due to an illness, Kyle Okposo remained absent from practice on Tuesday. Dan Bylsma said Okposo's condition has yet to improve, and added that Okposo has met with team doctors to try and get more information on his ailment.

With Okposo still absent, here's how the lineup looked at practice:

9 Evander Kane - 90 Ryan O'Reilly - 12 Brian Gionta
82 Marcus Foligno - 15 Jack Eichel - 23 Sam Reinhart
49 C.J. Smith/70 Alexander Nylander - 71 Evan Rodrigues - 63 Tyler Ennis
48 William Carrier/44 Nicolas Deslauriers - 28 Zemgus Girgensons - 26 Matt Moulson

4 Josh Gorges - 55 Rasmus Ristolainen
29 Jake McCabe - 47 Zach Bogosian

77 Dmitry Kulikov - 6 Cody Franson
41 Justin Falk

40 Robin Lehner
31 Anders Nilsson

Players react to Olympic decision

On Monday, the NHL released a statement announcing it would not create a break in the schedule next season to accommodate players to participate in the Winter Olympics in South Korea. You can read the full statement in the Tweet below:

Players were asked to react on Tuesday, and they expressed disappointment with the hope that an agreement can be reached in the future.

"For someone who's represented USA Hockey before and takes pride in it, I don't want to speak for other guys but I'm sure they feel pretty similar, it's a bit disappointing," Eichel said. "The Olympics is a great event. It's something the whole world looks forward to, us included, so in terms of trying to grow our game I think it could have been a good opportunity for us and it usually is. I think it's a good way to bring our country together. It's just tough, you grow up watching it and you get to the point of playing professionally and it kind of goes away. So, a little bit sad."

Eichel has represented USA Hockey since a young age, having joined the National Team Developmental Program beginning in the 2012-13 season and represented Team USA at multiple World Junior Championships as well as the World Championship in 2015.

On Tuesday, he thought back even further, to his experience representing the country at the Winter Youth Olympics in Austria back in 2012.

"I was a freshman in high school and wasn't really sure what I was getting in to and [it was] pretty special two weeks for me," he said. "Our team didn't do well but just being able to be there, you're living in an Olympic Village, you're with all the other athletes at the opening ceremony

"... To think about how special that event was and how good it was, just to imagine what the Olympics are like, it's probably that multiplied by 100. Obviously it's something that as a hockey player and professionally, you just deal with and move on."

Lehner, who was chosen for Team Sweden at the World Cup of Hockey this past summer but chose to stay with the Sabres as he worked his way back from an injury, expressed his disappointment in not being able to bring the game to a world stage.

"I know when the Olympics are on, I watch a lot of sports that I had never seen before that I think are pretty cool," he said. "I think it's the same way for hockey. People that haven't really followed hockey maybe get to tune in and become fans of a new sport. I think that's unfortunate."

Bylsma, who coached Team USA at the last Winter Olympics in 2014, offered perspective from both sides of the equation.

"The Olympics is the best tournament in the world, and I like it when the best players are playing in the best tournament in the world," he said. "I think I've enjoyed that tournament as a fan, I've enjoyed it as a coach. As an NHL coach and team-wise, it's stuck in the middle of your season. It's a three-week break. It condenses the rest of your schedule.

"I'm somewhat disappointed the best players aren't going to be playing in the best tournament, but I also understand it from the league's side and from the coach's side. It's a tough tournament to send your players to."

Canadiens take six-game win streak into Buffalo

The Associated Press

April 4, 2017

BUFFALO, N.Y. — Two teams heading in opposite directions will meet for the final time this season on Wednesday when the Buffalo Sabres take on the Montreal Canadiens.

The Canadiens (46-24-9) are riding a six-game win streak and preparing to make a postseason run. Montreal sits at the top of the Atlantic Division with 101 points and clinched the division title after a 4-1 win over Florida on Monday.

"When you clinch the spot, it's always good news," said left winger Artturi Lehkonen, according to the team's website. "Now we've just got to keep building our game towards the playoffs."

Lehkonen had two goals for Montreal in the victory.

The Canadiens have been rejuvenated ever since making a surprising coaching change in mid-February, replacing Michel Therrien with former Boston coach Claude Julien. Since then, Montreal has only six losses in its past 21 games.

On Wednesday, Montreal will be without top defenseman Shea Weber, who is out for precautionary reasons.

"I've been told that we're sending him back to Montreal as a precaution," Julien said, according to the team's website. "Just like we've done over the last couple of weeks, we're making decisions based on the situations we're being forced to deal with. Things aren't urgent right now, so we're just taking precautions."

Montreal captain Max Pacioretty leads the team in points with 67 (35 goals, 32 assists) in 79 games. Alexander Radulov is second in points with 53 (18 goals, 35 assists). Between the pipes, Carey Price has a goals-against average of .924 and a 2.20 goals-against average.

The Sabres (32-35-12) are coming off one of their worst efforts of the season. In Monday's home loss to the rival Toronto Maple Leafs, the team allowed three goals in a span of 43 seconds early in the first period on its way to a 4-2 defeat.

"Sloppy," Sabres center Jack Eichel said. "We didn't play well. Myself, I wasn't very good. I've got to be better. I'm supposed to be a leader on this team."

"It's unfortunate, these are games that are real easy to get up for, especially playing Toronto. We had an opportunity to play spoiler there. For the most part, we've played them pretty well this year. More than anything, it's a bit frustrating."

Eichel had a late goal for Buffalo, scoring on a breakaway, but by that point the result had been well established. Buffalo was outshot 18-2 in the first period and 45-22 overall.

"The first 10 minutes of the game we basically handed them two of the goals," Sabres coach Dan Bylsma said. "That's no way to start a hockey game. They were gifts, they were gaffes."

Montreal has won two of the three previous meetings between these teams this season, with Buffalo's lone win in overtime on Jan. 21. Montreal won the season opener against Buffalo 4-1 and also picked up a 5-2 home win on Jan. 31.