



Buffalo Sabres

Daily Press Clips

January 14, 2018

Stamkos breaks late tie, Lightning beat Sabres 5-3

The Associated Press

January 13, 2019

BUFFALO, N.Y. (AP) — Steven Stamkos broke a tie with 5:16 remaining in the NHL-leading Tampa Bay Lightning's 5-3 victory over the Buffalo Sabres on Saturday night.

Nikita Kucherov, Brayden Point, Ondrej Palat and Ryan Callahan also scored, and Louis Domingue stopped 30 shots. The Lightning have won 18 of their last 20.

Sam Reinhart, Tage Thompson and Marco Scandella scored for Buffalo.

Scandella gave Buffalo a 3-2 lead at 5:54 of the third, chipping home a pass from Jason Pominville from close range. Just 23 seconds later, the Lightning took advantage of a bad giveaway by Sabres defenseman Lawrence Pilut, and Stamkos found Kucherov for his 22nd goal of the season.

Stamkos then put Tampa Bay ahead for good late, taking a drop pass from Kucherov and firing a hard shot to Ullmark's blocker side.

Sabres head to Western Canada looking to repeat last year's success

By Mike Harrington

The Buffalo News

January 13, 2019

The Western Canada road trip was a rare bright spot for the Buffalo Sabres last season. They're desperately in need of similar success this year.

The Sabres hit the skies for Edmonton Sunday, where they'll open their annual three-game trip Monday night in Rogers Place against the Oilers. The road has not been kind for Buffalo of late, as the Sabres are just 1-6-2 in their last nine games outside of KeyBank Center and have dropped four straight. They went 5-0 on their road during their 10-game winning streak in November.

"It's going to be tough," defenseman Marco Scandella said after Saturday's 5-3 loss to Tampa Bay. "Once our backs are against the wall, we play our best hockey, so we're going to go on the road, simplify it and grind out games. I'm very confident in this group and we're going to go and have a good road trip."

Since the NHL revised the schedule to once again include every road locale in 2013, the Sabres have gone 5-9-1 on this trip. They were just 2-9-1 until their unlikely three-game sweep last season that included shutout victories in both Edmonton and Vancouver. Buffalo was swept in both the 2014-15 and 2015-16 seasons.

Edmonton standout Connor McDavid turned 22 Sunday but did not participate in the Oilers' public skills competition at Rogers Place because he was ill. There was no immediate word on his status for Monday's visit by the Sabres.

The Sabres will be trying to bounce back from Saturday's frustrating defeat to the league-leading Lightning, which saw Buffalo give up three straight goals in the third period that wiped out a 3-2 lead. They are 6-10-4 in their last 20 games and Saturday's loss dropped them out of an Eastern Conference playoff slot for the first time since early November.

Sabres fall apart late in the third period, lose to red-hot Lightning

"Every shift and every play matters, especially against good teams," coach Phil Housley said after Saturday's loss. "You have to make the right decisions at the right time, take what the game gives you. You can't force things. Sometimes the play is just get it in deep if you don't have a play. That is the play and you have to live to fight another day. We've just got to go back to work. We've got to fight and keep clawing away. We knew nothing was going to be easy and that's a valuable lesson for our guys."

Here's a quick update on how the three upcoming opponents stand:

Edmonton (9 p.m. EST, Monday): The Oilers are 12-11-2 since Ken Hitchcock took over as coach from Todd McLellan and are two points out of the final wild-card slot in the West. McDavid is fourth in the NHL in scoring with 67 points (27 goals, 40 assists). Leon Draisaitl is also having another big year (23-31-54). Edmonton is 3-3 in January after ending December on a six-game losing streak.

Calgary (9:30 p.m. EST, Wednesday): The Flames crushed Arizona, 7-1, Sunday to win their fifth straight and improve to 8-1-1 in their last 10 games. In Bill Peters' first year as coach after coming from Carolina, they have soared to the top of the West on the strength of a 15-4-4 home record and plus-40 overall goal differential. Last year's 2-1 Sabres overtime victory snapped a nine-game losing streak in the Saddledome that dated to 2000. Johnny Gaudreau (27-42-69) moved into second in the NHL in scoring during Sunday's win while Sean Monahan (25-32-57) snapped a tie with Sidney Crosby and cracked the top 10.

Vancouver (10 p.m. EST, Friday): Rookie sensation Elias Pettersson has been out since Jan. 3 with a sprained knee but has resumed skating and it will be interesting to see if he's able to return by the end of the week. In 38 games this season, Pettersson has 22 goals and 42 points. The Canucks blew past Florida, 5-1, Sunday to move into a tie with Minnesota and reeling Anaheim for the West's final wild card. The Ducks fell to 0-7-4 in their last 11 games with an overtime loss in Winnipeg.

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Tampa Bay defenseman Mikhail Sergachev was fined \$2,403.67, one half his daily cap hit and the maximum allowable under the CBA, for his cross-checking infraction on Sabres center Johan Larsson in the third period of Saturday's game. Sergachev got a double minor for cross-checking on the play while Larsson received a minor for cross-checking.

The Sabres' power play, however, was wiped out 23 seconds later on the controversial elbowing call against Jack Eichel. And 54 seconds after that penalty, Tampa Bay's Steven Stamkos scored to break the 3-3 tie and send the Lightning on to their 5-3 win.

Sabres fall apart late in the third period, lose to red-hot Lightning

By Lance Lysowski

The Buffalo News

January 12, 2019

Jack Eichel felt helpless. All the Buffalo Sabres' captain could do was watch from the penalty box as Tampa Bay Lightning center Steven Stamkos glided into the offensive zone and fired a wrist shot over Linus Ullmark's blocker Saturday night in KeyBank Center.

That goal with 5:16 remaining in regulation was the eventual game-winner, and the red-hot Lightning escaped with a 5-3 victory over the Sabres. It was a tragic ending to an otherwise promising three periods for Eichel and his teammates.

They outshot Tampa Bay, 33-30, and were the better team for much of the game, despite playing the second night of a back-to-back. The Sabres, now 23-16-6, twice took the lead, only for the Lightning to roar back.

Yet, there did not seem to be a silver lining in the home dressing room. After all, Buffalo fell out of the second wild-card spot with Montreal's 3-0 win over Colorado.

"Sure, there's frustration," Sabres winger Sam Reinhart said. "But we're right there. There's no time to dwell on it. We're right in the hunt. That's where we wanted to be at the start of the year."

There are 37 games remaining for the Sabres to position themselves among the top eight in the Eastern Conference, beginning with a three-game road trip to western Canada.

They are still only two wins away from matching their total from all of last season and again proved capable of trading chances with the league's best.

However, the Sabres have won only six of their last 20 games since they led the NHL in points entering a Nov. 29 game at Tampa Bay. They've been plagued by inconsistent play in all three zones.

Buffalo found solutions Saturday, albeit for roughly 55 minutes. Reinhart, winger Tage Thompson and defenseman Marco Scandella scored. The latter's goal with 14:06 remaining in regulation gave the Sabres a 3-2 lead against the top team in the NHL.

Tampa Bay Lightning 5, Buffalo Sabres 3

Tampa Bay, 35-8-2, has won 18 of its last 20 games and holds a 14-point lead over Toronto for first in the Atlantic Division. It scored only 26 seconds into the game when a blocked shot gave Brayden Point an open look in front of Ullmark.

The Sabres answered five minutes later when Jeff Skinner collected a loose puck along the right-wing boards and passed to Reinhart, whose wrist shot went over backup goalie Louis Domingue's glove.

Thompson capped the period when he received a 2-on-1 pass from Zemgus Girgensons and poked the puck in with only 10 seconds remaining for a 2-1 lead. The Sabres had more shots (16-6) and shot attempts (27-12) in the first 20 minutes.

"They're a good team," defenseman Zach Bogosian said. "Whenever you play against top players or top teams in the league you try to elevate your game."

The lead did not last because of another poor defensive play.

Tampa Bay tied the score 7:50 into the second period when defenseman Mikhail Sergachev skated by Vladimir Sobotka and made a pass to the slot, where Scandella was unable to prevent Ondrej Palat from directing the puck into the net.

"We made the wrong mistakes at the wrong time during the game," coach Phil Housley said.

Scandella regained the lead for the Sabres at 5:54 into the third period when he joined the rush to create a 2-on-1 and capitalized from the slot on a Jason Pominville pass.

It all unraveled from there. Nikita Kucherov tied it again 23 seconds later after Lawrence Pilut's defensive-zone turnover. The Sabres had a power play with 6:33 left in regulation, but that lasted only 23 seconds because Eichel was penalized for elbowing Ryan McDonagh in the back of the head.

Stamkos scored 54 seconds later during the 4-on-4 when Jake McCabe turned the puck over in the defensive zone, beginning the Lightning's rush up the ice. With only Casey Mittelstadt and Rasmus Ristolainen back to defend, Kucherov made a drop pass to Stamkos, who dragged the puck into the slot and scored his 24th goal of the season.

"It's frustrating that it ends like that, but you can't blame the refs obviously," Eichel, who called his elbow incident contact, said. "It's a fast game out there. They're making calls. They're part of the play, too. I think we just have to find a way. I feel like we're close right now. We just have to get over that hump."

Ryan Callahan's power-play goal with 1:19 remaining sealed the game. The Sabres' progress can't be measured by only one game against a team that's on a historic pace, however, it was another ugly finish that cost them two points in the standings.

They missed more opportunities to score – including 33 seconds of a 5-on-3 in the first period – which continued a troubling trend. The Sabres have a negative-9 goal differential since the 10-game winning streak ended Nov. 29.

"We're facing a little adversity here and we have to overcome that," Housley said.

The Wraparound: Lightning 5, Sabres 3

By Lance Lysowski

The Buffalo News

January 12, 2019

The Buffalo Sabres were the hottest team in the NHL when they carried a 10-game winning streak into Tampa Bay's Amalie Arena on Nov. 29. That distinction has since been earned by Tampa Bay, which won 17 of its previous 19 games entering a game Saturday night in KeyBank Center.

This appeared to be a poorly-timed rematch for the Sabres. They were on the second night of a back-to-back and had allowed far too many scoring chances in 19 games since the streak ended with a loss in Tampa Bay.

Though the Sabres would lose to the Lightning, 5-3, Saturday night, Buffalo again proved capable of trading scoring chances with the league's best. The loss dropped the Sabres' record to 23-16-6 and prevented them from moving into the first wild-card spot.

Steven Stamkos scored the game-winning goal with 5:16 remaining in regulation, and Ryan Callahan added a power-play insurance goal less than four minutes later. Tampa Bay (35-8-2) maintained its lead in the Atlantic Division and has won nine of its last 10 on the road, despite backup goalie Louis Domingue making only his second start since Dec. 10.

The Sabres twice took the lead, only for the Lightning to roar back. Marco Scandella scored the go-ahead goal with 15:35 remaining in the third period, but Nikita Kucherov answered 23 seconds later to tie the score off a turnover by Lawrence Pilut. Brayden Point and Ondrej Palat also scored for Tampa Bay.

Sam Reinhart and Tage Thompson had goals for Buffalo, which failed to score on its three power-play opportunities -- including 33 seconds of a 5-on-3 in the first period -- and got 25 saves from Linus Ullmark in net.

Late elbow: Buffalo had a power play with 6:33 remaining but Jack Eichel was called for elbowing only 22 seconds later. Stamkos would score the game-winning goal moments later.

Opening salvo: The Lightning scored only 26 seconds into the game when Tyler Johnson won an offensive-zone faceoff, Kucherov's shot was blocked and Point shot a loose puck in for his 29th goal of the season. Tampa Bay was 18-2-2 when scoring first this season.

Sam I am: Following an unsuccessful power play, Reinhart tied the score 1-1 when his wrist shot went over Domingue's glove 5:47 into the first period. Reinhart has 10 goals with a career-high 31 assists this season.

Late goal: Coach Phil Housley would have been thrilled if the period ended with a 1-1 tie. However, Zengus Girgensons' hustle turned into a goal when he skated down the left-wing boards for an odd-man rush and passed over to Thompson, who barely poked the puck past Domingue for a 2-1 lead with 10 seconds left in the first.

Impressive start: The Sabres led in shots (16-6) and shot attempts (27-12) entering the first intermission.

Lightning answer: Despite a flurry of chances in the second period, the Sabres were held scoreless and one mistake resulted in the tying goal. Lightning defenseman Mikhail Sergachev skated past Vladimir Sobotka in the right-wing circle and passed to the slot, where Palat directed the puck over Ullmark's blocker 7:50 into the second period.

Dahlin milestone: With his secondary assist on Reinhart's goal, Rasmus Dahlin became the seventh defenseman in NHL history to reach 20 assists before his 19th birthday, joining Housley, Doug Bodger, Bobby Orr, Jim Benning, Aaron Ekblad and Ray Bourque.

Lineup: Defensemen Matt Hunwick and Nathan Beaulieu, and winger Remi Elie were again healthy scratches. Tampa Bay chose to start Domingue rather than starting goalie Andrei Vasilevskiy, saving the latter for a Sunday night game against the New York Islanders. The Lightning also chose to scratch defenseman Anton Stralman, who is averaging 21:23 per game, for rest.

Prospect watch: Center Matej Pekar, a fourth-round draft pick of the Sabres last June, reportedly suffered a broken collarbone Thursday while playing a game for the Barrie Colts of the Ontario Hockey League. Pekar, an 18-year-old under contract with the Sabres, has 14 goals among 36 points in 33 games for Barrie this season. He played for Czech Republic at the World Junior Championships.

Next: The Sabres will fly to Edmonton on Sunday, where they will play the Oilers on Monday at 9 p.m. Eastern. Buffalo then plays at Calgary on Wednesday and Vancouver on Friday before being idle until after the All-Star Game.

Mike Harrington: Strong showings against Tampa no consolation for sliding Sabres

By Mike Harrington
The Buffalo News
January 12, 2019

Say this for the Buffalo Sabres: They might be the last team the Tampa Bay Lightning hope to see come the first round of the playoffs in April. If the Sabres can somehow sneak in.

The Bolts have some flat-out stupid statistics -- headlined by a 35-8-2 record. And although they're 2-1 against the Sabres this year after Saturday's 5-3 victory in KeyBank Center, they've been left with plenty of food for thought.

The Sabres, meanwhile, have a lot to ponder Sunday as they make the long flight west Sunday to Edmonton to start their annual Western Canada road trip Monday night. The euphoria of November is long gone, replaced by serious question marks that have a cloud over this season.

Now the Sabres have a new dilemma: They won't see their home ice again until Feb. 1 and they're out of a playoff position for the first time in more than two months.

It was Nov. 27 -- 20 games ago -- that Buffalo beat San Jose to improve to 17-6-2 with its 10th straight win. The Lightning, meanwhile, suffered a 3-1 loss to Anaheim to fall to 17-7-1. According to Elias Sports, the Sabres were the first team in NHL history to go from last overall one season to first overall 25 games into the next one.

Since then? The Sabres are 6-10-4 with nine of the losses by one or two goals. And with Montreal's 3-0 win over Colorado Saturday night, they dropped out of what looked like a sure playoff spot.

The Lightning, meanwhile, have gone 18-1-1 in the last 20 to make mincemeat of the Presidents' Trophy race.

"We're in these games. We just have to find a way to get over the hump and win some of these games," said Buffalo defenseman Marco Scandella. "I feel like tonight again we played a great game for 55 minutes. The last five minutes. we have to find a way to get better. It's just not good enough."

The Sabres looked lost Friday night in Carolina but played with a lot more purpose and passion on Saturday. And it's the third time they've shown their wares pretty well this year against Tampa Bay.

Things didn't start out well. Brayden Point scored after just 26 seconds, the Lightning's breakout player of the season clearly making a quick commentary on losing the Last Men In vote for the All-Star Game to Jeff Skinner.

But that was just about all you heard from the Lightning in the first period. The Sabres were hard on the puck the rest of the way in forging a 2-1 lead and getting some help from backup goalie Louis Domingue, who flat-out whiffed with his glove on Sam Reinhart's shot from long range and didn't get much of a piece of Tage Thomposon's soft shot on a 2-on-1 with Zemgus Girgensons.

The Sabres took another lead in the third when Scandella converted a super Jason Pominville feed. But Tampa responded 23 seconds later, with Nikita Kucherov taking advantage of Lawrence Pilut's charity off a Steven Stamkos feed.

The end was a sour one. A Jack Eichel elbowing penalty that led to a Stamkos goal. The fans in the building were enraged and social media erupted, in part by what was perceived as Ryan McDonagh's embellishment. Eichel was diplomatic.

"If you look at it again, I don't lift my arm. I don't move my elbow," Eichel said. "I'm really just poking at the puck at my stick to try to avoid him honestly, to try to get the puck. Incidental contact. I don't even really know how much I clipped him. Refs have to make a decision at that point. It's tough on them too so I don't want to blame anyone in that situation."

"Obviously I don't want to put our team in the box. Stamkos gets that goal and it's frustrating when you're sitting behind the glass watching that happen."

The Lightning are the Stanley Cup favorites by a big margin, not just because they can draw calls at crunch time. But the Sabres have been right there with them in every meeting this year. That's important because the Sabres would almost certainly be looking at a first-round matchup with the Bolts if they finished in the second wild-card spot.

That's of course if they sneak in for the first time since 2011. Which probably will take some intervention from GM Jason Botterill to get this club some help at center.

"They've really built a really good nucleus," Bolts coach Jon Cooper said of the Sabres. "In years past, you used to come into Buffalo and think, 'OK, there's a good chance we're getting two points.' Well, that's not the case anymore. They compete hard, they play with structure and that's what happens. In a league that's got so much parity and is so close, they're in there and good on them."

The Sabres have played three tight games against Tampa Bay this season. Two have been tough losses. Like a lot of things lately, something went wrong at a key time.

Another third-period lead vaporized. It would have been a great win to have in the bank heading on the road. Didn't happen. Now things only get harder. And the questions get deeper.

Inside the NHL: Simple tweaks can help All-Star Game rosters

By Mike Harrington

The Buffalo News

January 12, 2019

There's been so much consternation about rosters for the All-Star Game this year that one thing is certain: Fans care about it. They want to watch. There's an odd amount of get-rid-of-it sniping from Canadian media, almost as if it's a gimmick that's beneath them.

Please. Of course it's a gimmick. It's a skills competition one night followed by a 3-on-3 tournament the next. And there's nothing wrong with that at all.

What's the problem with selling the game more, particularly south of the border? Did the folks on the other side of the Peace Bridge not pay attention to what was going on in Nashville and Vegas the last two springs?

For the league, it's prime-time programming for NBC and CBC, a great sales pitch for sponsors and a terrific meeting place just past midseason. It's not going anywhere, so the league should be listening to all the outcry about rosters and the Last Men In vote and tinker with things to give fans more of what they want.

When we head to San Jose, it will be weird that the rosters won't include the likes of Mitch Marner, Morgan Rielly, Braydon Point, Sean Monahan, Max Domi, Dylan Larkin, Brad Marchand and Mark Giordano. And it certainly would have been a huge injustice had Jeff Skinner not won the Last Men in vote. This corner was expecting the huge reach of Leafs Nation to benefit Rielly and it was surprising that didn't happen.

(On second thought, forget about Marchand. Nobody outside of Boston wants to see him).

I remain torn about the one player per team rule. On one hand, you don't want to give multiple markets a reason to not watch the game because their team doesn't have a player there. And you'd run the risk of, say, an Atlantic Division roster that might have as many as eight players between two super teams like Tampa Bay and Toronto. That wouldn't be good for anyone.

Sabres lose but All-Star nod, 30th goal makes Skinner's night finer in Carolina

The one thing the league should do next year is eliminate the necessity for defensemen. It's a 3-on-3 tournament. If a blueliner is worthy like Brent Burns or Kris Letang, fine. Select them. But the game has become about young scoring stars. That's who fans want to see. If we have to watch somebody from, say, the Florida Panthers – and that's probably a big if – why are we subjected to Keith Yandle and not able to watch Aleksander Barkov?

Why a secret Last Men In?

This corner's view on the "Last Men In" vote was that it was a terrific conversation piece, just like baseball has used for several years to select the final two players for its midsummer classic. But typically for the odd way the NHL often does business, how in the world did the league not let anyone know it was adding this twist to the game?

NBC Sports Network announced the rosters on its pregame show before a 7 p.m. game and the voting for each division's 11th player wasn't announced on the network until nearly 90 minutes later on its first intermission report.

There was no advance notice given to fans or anyone covering the league that there was going to be such a vote. So the league got 90 minutes of complaints from fans about all the players left out rather than discussion of who might be in or who might win the vote.

It was needless. It was absurd to keep that a secret. There was no benefit to NBC. No one was watching for it knowing it was coming. I was in another room when the broadcast mentioned it and actually rewound the DVR to see what was being discussed.

When you ask "why" about the NHL, sometimes there simply isn't any good answer. Also see: Playoff format.

Coliseum magic

The Islanders entered Saturday 7-5-2 at Barclays Center and 3-1-1 at NYCB Live, the renovated Nassau Coliseum. But after Saturday's game against the Rangers, they have just three more games left in Brooklyn this season and the rest will be in Uniondale, likely a big boost to their playoff hopes.

The Islanders averaged 13,795 in their first five games back at the Coliseum, with three sellouts of 13,917. The average in Brooklyn is just 10,476.

"There is a difference and we'd be lying to ourselves if we said there wasn't," captain Anders Lee told Newsday. "But we're professionals. This is what we deal with. We handle it and we go play hockey. We can't control where we play and what Tuesday night game is where. The tough side of that with the different environments is the crowd can save you on some nights. When you're struggling, they can save you."

"It is what it is," defenseman Ryan Pulock added. "The energy at the Coliseum has been electric and something we can feed off of. Sometimes at Barclays we have to create that energy ourselves."

The Sabres' road game against the Islanders is March 30 and it's at the Coliseum. Can't wait. The ghosts are everywhere and early reports are that the renovation has been terrific.

Around the boards

* In addition to Jack Eichel and Skinner, the Sabres are going to be represented at the All-Star Game by equipment manager Dave Williams and assistant George Babcock. Trust me when I say the longtime employees are both organizational stars as well. Babcock, with towel draped over his shoulder, even earned a measure of social media fame this season when the team tweeted bench shots of his goal celebration antics with trainer Rich Stinziano. The GIF files were watch-over-and-over hilarious.

* How much is the NHL stoked about its move to Seattle? Commissioner Gary Bettman visited last week and pointedly said the league is going to have both the draft and the All-Star Game in the Emerald City within the next seven years. You won't find many arguments anywhere about that choice.

* Leafs coach Mike Babcock said struggling forward William Nylander needs to stay away from all discussion of his brutal start since signing his new contract, including sports talk television and radio.

"That's what the country music channel is for and the hunting channel," Babcock deadpanned. "Wild TV 393, it's dialed in. They never talk about hockey once. Honest to God, it's unbelievable. Beautiful animals, mountains, hiking, fishing. Thing of beauty."

* NBCSports.com provided some sobering history for Sabres fans: Since the 2005 lockout, only two of 37 teams that won at least 17 of the first 25 games failed to make the playoffs. The Sabres, who have slumped badly since opening 17-6-2, are trying to avoid joining the 2015-16 Canadiens and 2017-18 Blues.

Sabres glad to have Kevin Porter back to help lead Amerks' renaissance

By Bill Hoppe
The Buffalo News
January 12, 2019

ROCHESTER – When the Sabres brought back veteran Kevin Porter to the organization in 2017, it sent a strong message the team's new regime would be making the Americans a priority again.

Porter, 32, captained the American Hockey League affiliate during his previous stint with the Sabres and also played 45 NHL games.

During Porter's three seasons away, he won the Stanley Cup with the Penguins in 2016, earning some regular duty. The center also played under Sabres general manager Jason Botterill, who ran Pittsburgh's AHL affiliate, and Amerks coach Chris Taylor, an assistant with Wilkes-Barre/Scranton.

The Amerks, meanwhile, never sniffed the postseason.

"We brought him here for a reason, to change the culture," Taylor said before Friday's 5-1 loss to the Toronto Marlies in Blue Cross Arena.

Porter, a veteran of 447 AHL games, has relished the challenge of helping the Amerks establish a winner.

"It's nice to be that guy that people say, 'Wow, this program really turned around and you're a part of that,'" said Porter, who returned Friday from a lower-body injury that sidelined him 13 games.

A season and half later, the Amerks rank among the AHL's heavyweights. They made the playoffs last year and rank first in the North Division this season with 46 points through 37 games.

"Things aren't going to change in a year, even two years," Porter said. "It's going to take a little bit of time. But I think they've done a great job of turning it around. ... Slowly but surely things are getting better."

While the Amerks went 7-6-0 without Porter, they missed him. The 2008 Hobey Baker Award winner at Michigan has kept producing offense – he has five goals and 14 points in 24 games this season – into his 30s.

But 11 seasons into his career, Porter's leadership skills – "He's our voice," Amerks defenseman Zach Redmond said – might be his best assets.

"He's someone that everyone looks up to, just on and off the ice," Redmond said. "He's a good leader. He's kind of the guy that arranges everything. Everything goes through him from the coaches to the team. So not only are we missing a good player, but we're missing our leader."

Taylor said the Amerks missed Porter's calmness between periods.

"He's the guy that everyone respects and listens to," Taylor said.

Porter hadn't played since leveling a Providence Bruins player Dec. 5. While his opponent endured the brunt of the hit, Porter was injured.

"Something just didn't feel right," Porter said.

Taylor leaned on Porter heavily again Friday, utilizing him on a top line between Wayne Simpson and Scott Wilson.

"He's not going to burn down the side and beat you, but he's super smart," said Wilson, who played with Porter in the Pittsburgh organization. "He's always in the right spot and has really good hands in tight. He's a guy, whether it's on the power play or five-on-five, he's going to be able to make that little pass to you in the middle."

Taylor said Porter "makes the smart play."

"We miss his creativity," Taylor said. "Just five-on-five, he adds more depth and balance to our team, gives us four really strong lines right now that teams are going to have a hard time matching lines against us."

Referee honored

Chris Ciamaga, a Buffalo State College and St. Francis High School graduate, refereed his final AHL game Friday after 15 seasons.

The league honored him on the Blue Cross Arena ice before the game. Following the contest, some players sought him out. West Seneca's Chris Mueller, a center with the Marlies, posed for a photo with Ciamaga.

Ciamaga is HarborCenter's assistant director of hockey.

Patriots love

During an interview shown on the scoreboard during a break in the action Friday, Amerks defenseman Brandon Hickey, who attended Boston University, said he was a New England Patriots fan. The crowd responded by booing.

Tampa Bay's Sergachev gets fined by the NHL for cross-checking Larsson

By Paul Hamilton

WGR 550

January 13, 2019

Buffalo, NY (WGR 550) - The NHL Department of Player Safety has fined Lightning defenseman Mikhail Sergachev \$2,403.67 for his cross-check to the face of the Sabres forward Johan Larsson. That's the maximum he could be fined according to the Collective Bargaining Agreement.

Sergachev drew blood, so he was assessed a four-minute high sticking penalty, while Larsson went for cross-checking.

The Sabres did not practice on Sunday before flying to Edmonton.

Sabres' Larsson has been adding a bit of offense to his defense

By Paul Hamilton

WGR 550

January 12, 2019

Buffalo, NY (WGR 550) - Coming into Saturday's game, Johan Larsson had four goals and three assists for seven points in 38 games. Lately, he's had two goals and an assist, which is all they need from him; a modest contribution to go with his very good defensive play. Larsson said, "I just feel like they're going in right now. The chances are going in, I'm getting some lucky bounces and earlier in the year they didn't go in for me, but now it's going in and it's nice to see."

It doesn't seem to matter who Larsson plays with; his line seems to be able to get down into the offensive zone and get a good cycle going. Larsson said, "We want to get down there as fast as we can and be heavy so we can create something down low."

Larsson has been part of a penalty kill that came into Saturday third in the National Hockey League.

Kyle Okposo has two goals and three points in his last five games. He credits Larsson in helping his game, "I think Larry has been playing well all season and he does a really good job in the defensive zone and coming low to support the puck he he's been creating that momentum up the ice which makes it easy for him to get you the puck and then he comes up with speed through the middle of the ice and we're able to play in the offensive zone, so he's played great this year and he's definitely helped out my game too."

In the game against Tampa Bay, the Larsson line again spent most of the night in the offensive zone. They were relentless on the forecheck and didn't allow the Lightning to run the plays in their breakouts that they like.

Lightning storm back for 5-3 win over Sabres

By Pat Malacaro

WGR 550

January 12, 2019

The Tampa Bay Lightning scored three unanswered goals in the third period to defeat the Buffalo Sabres 5-3 on Saturday night at KeyBank Center.

It took less than 30-seconds for the Lightning to take a 1-0 lead thanks to an offensive zone face-off win. Brayden Point's 29th goal of the year gave the visitors the lead. Nikita Kucherov and Tyler Johnson were credited with the assists on the goal.

Sam Reinhart answered for Buffalo five minutes later to tie the game at 1-1. Jack Eichel created a screen in front of Louis Domingue to help create the scoring chance. Jeff Skinner and Rasmus Dahlin assisted on the game-tying goal.

The Sabres had a 5-on-3 power play for more than a half minute, but failed to score. Steven Stamkos and Yannick Gourde were both in the penalty box, giving the blue and gold the two-man advantage.

Zemgus Girgensons and Tage Thompson combined on a 2-on-1 chance with just seconds to go in the opening frame, giving Buffalo a 2-1 lead. Thompson was credited with his sixth goal of the season, with Girgensons and Vladimir Sobotka assisting on the goal. The Sabres finished the first period with 16 shots, compared to just six for Tampa Bay.

Tampa Bay evened up the score at 2-2 with a goal partway through the middle stanza after Mikhail Sergachev moved in from the point with the puck and fed Ondrej Palat in the slot. Sergachev and Victor Hedman were given the assists on the score.

That was the lone goal of the second period. Buffalo out-shot Tampa Bay 12-11 in the period as well, with neither team being called for a penalty.

An odd-man rush by the Sabres nearly six minutes into the third period gave the team a 3-2 lead over Tampa Bay. Marco Scandella was on the receiving end of a Jason Pominville pass, giving the defenseman his third goal of the season. Pominville and Conor Sheary assisted on the goal.

The lead was short lived for the Sabres, as a turnover in Buffalo's zone resulted in a goal for the Lightning. Nikita Kucherov was able to rip a wrist shot into the net from the slot. It was Kucherov's 22nd goal of the year. Stamkos was credited with the lone assist on the goal that made it 3-3 in the third period.

Stamkos' second point of the night resulted in his 24th goal of the season and gave Tampa their first lead since the opening period. It came with each team a man down. Sergachev was serving a double minor for high sticking, with Jack Eichel was penalized for elbowing. Ryan Callahan increased the lead to 5-3 for the Lightning with just over a minute to go in regulation.

GAME SUMMARY

Goal Summary:

First Period:

BUF: 5:47 - Sam Reinhart (10) (Jeff Skinner, Rasmus Dahlin); 19:50 - Tage Thompson (6) (Zemgus Girgensons, Vladimir Sobotka)

TB: 0:26 - Brayden Point (29) (Nikita Kucherov, Tyler Johnson)

Second Period:

BUF: NONE

TB: 7:50 - Ondrej Palat (6) (Mikhail Sergachev, Viktor Hedman)

Third Period:

BUF: 5:54 - Marco Scandella (3) (Jason Pominville, Conor Sheary)

TB: 6:17 - Nikita Kucherov (22) (Steven Stamkos); 14:44 - Steven Stamkos (24) (Nikita Kucherov, Viktor Hedman); 18:41 - Ryan Callahan (5) PP (Anthony Cirelli)

Penalty Summary:

First Period:

BUF: NONE

TB: 3:17 - Braydon Coburn (Roughing - 2 min.); 10:57 - Steven Stamkos (Tripping - 2 min.); 12:25 - Yannick Gourde (Holding - 2 min.)

Second Period:

BUF: NONE

TB: NONE

Third Period:

BUF: 13:27 - Johan Larsson (Cross Checking - 2 min.); 13:50 - Jack Eichel (Elbowing - 2 min.); 16:45 - Lawrence Pilut (Holding - 2 min.)

TB: 13:27 - Mikhail Sergachev (High Sticking - 2 min.); 13:27 - Mikhail Sergachev (High Sticking - 2 min.)

Shots on Goal:

BUF: 33 (16, 12, 5)

TB: 30 (6, 11, 13)

Goalies:

BUF: Linus Ullmark - 25 saves

TB: Louis Domingue - 30 saves

Power Plays:

BUF: 0 for 4 (0%)

TB: 1 for 2 (50%)

Three Stars:

Nikita Kucherov - TB

Steven Stamkos - TB

Sam Reinhart - BUF

What's Next:

The Sabres head out on the road for their lone trip to Western Canada, beginning in Edmonton on Monday night. The puck drops at nine o'clock against the Oilers on the flagship home of the Sabres Radio Network - WGR Sports Radio 550. Pregame coverage with Brian Koziol begins at 8 p.m.

The Sabres have a big task on Saturday against Tampa Bay

By Paul Hamilton

WGR 550

January 12, 2019

Buffalo, NY (WGR 550) - The Sabres have run into a buzz saw this weekend. On Friday, they were in Carolina and lost 4-3 to a team that has won 6-of-7 games. They return home on Saturday to play a Tampa Bay team that is 17-1-1 in their last 19 games.

That all started in late November against the Sabres. Buffalo had just beaten San Jose for its 10th straight win. The Sabres went into Tampa with the most points in the National Hockey League and left one point behind the Lightning.

As I mentioned, the Lightning have gone 17-1-1, while the Sabres have gone 6-9-4. That means Tampa Bay picked up 35 points while Buffalo accumulated 16 points.

The Sabres beat Tampa Bay here in Buffalo 2-1. Carter Hutton was stellar in that game making 29 saves, but since this is back-to-back and Hutton played in Raleigh, I would think Linus Ullmark gets the call.

In his last start, Ullmark stood on his head making 39 saves in a 2-1 loss against Boston. Overall, Ullmark is 9-2-3 with a 2.69 goals-against and .924 save percentage.

Jason Pominville scored a nice goal on Friday, netting his first goal in 19 games. Afterwards, he really wasn't thinking about the puck finally going in for him. He was more concerned with how the team played. He felt they gave up way too much to the Hurricanes.

Buffalo is 3-6-1 in its last 10 games against Tampa Bay, 3-5-2 at home.

The Sabres are seventh in the NHL at home with a 14-5-3 record. That's a points percentage of .705. They've won their last two in Buffalo, but are 5-3-2 in their last 10.

Tampa Bay has won nine out of 10 games with the only loss in San Jose 5-2.

The Lightning are 8-1-1 in their last 10 road games and are 15-4-2 away from Florida.

Tampa Bay's point percentage is almost .800. They lead the NHL with 4.09 goals per-game and have the best power play at 30-percent. Their penalty killing isn't too shabby either as they're eighth.

That's the only place where Buffalo is ahead. The Sabres' PK is third in the league at 84.4-percent.

Brayden Point is the player people like to ignore. Point got snubbed for the NHL All-Star team after scoring 28 goals and 32 assists for 60 points in 44 games. He's sixth in NHL scoring and has 11 more points than teammate Steven Stamkos. Point has six points in his last two games and has points in 10-of-11 games, scoring eight goals and 15 assists for 23 points.

The NHL's leading scorer, Nikita Kucherov, has points in 14 out of 15 games. In that time, he has nine goals and 21 assists for 30 points. Overall, Kucherov has 21 goals and 51 assists for 72 points in 44 games. That works out to 134 points over 82 games.

The Sabres have not seen Andrei Vasilevskiy yet this season. He's played in 11-of-12 games since returning from injury, going 9-1-1. He's only given up one goal in his last two games against Carolina and Columbus.

Buffalo will not see Vasilevskiy in this game either as Louis Domingue gets his third start of the season against Buffalo. He's 15-4-0 with a 2.99 goals-against and .904 save percentage.

This season, Vasilevskiy is 18-4-2 with a 2.49 goals-against and .925 save percentage.

Join Brian Koziol for the pre-game starting at 6:00 when he'll be joined by Phil Housley, Kyle Okposo and Johan Larsson.

Using Lightning as a measuring rod shows Sabres how far they need to go

By Joe Yerdon

The Buffalo News

January 12, 2019

BUFFALO — It's been said that, "To be the man you have to beat the man," and the Buffalo Sabres' efforts against the Tampa Bay Lightning this season have shown that the NHL-leading Lightning are, indeed, the man. And while the Sabres are the fresh-faced up-and-comers, their three matchups against Tampa Bay have shown the Lightning are great for a reason.

The Sabres aim to be at the top of the NHL one of these years, but their games against Tampa have shown they've got learning to do. Buffalo is 1-2-0 against Tampa Bay and has been outscored 11-8. Considering the Lightning are the NHL's No. 1 offense (180 goals, 4.0 per game) and have won 18 of their last 20 games, it almost seems like a moral victory that the Sabres have played them as tightly as they have.

"Phil's done a great job with them and Jason with players they brought in," Lightning coach Jon Cooper said. "Jeff Skinner's got 30 goals at this point in time in the year. It's (Jack) Eichel and you go down the list, the list of defensemen they've got coming in and (Rasmus) Dahlin — they've really built a really good nucleus. In years past you used to come into Buffalo and you usually think 'We've got a good chance to get two points.' Well, that's not the case anymore. They compete hard, they play with structure, and that's what happens. In a league that's got so much parity and that's so close, they're in there."

It's easy enough for the coach of the team that's come out on top more often than not to say that, but when you break down their three battles this season, there's a progression that's worked in Buffalo's favor even if the results haven't played out that way. (All statistics from NaturalStatTrick.com)

Nov. 13: Sabres win 2-1

Although Buffalo got out to a 2-0 lead and moments after Tampa Bay cut it to 2-1, the Lightning poured it on for roughly 30 straight minutes only to see Carter Hutton stand on his head to save the win. Tampa Bay's 5-on-5 CorsiFor percentage at the end of the game was 65.9 and the Lightning outshot the Sabres 20-5 in the last two periods. It was a "bend but don't break" win in every sense for the Sabres.

Nov. 29: Lightning win 5-4

It was the game that ended the Sabres' 10-game winning streak and proved to be thrilling all-around. Tage Thompson gave the Sabres a 4-3 lead 2:29 into the third period only to see the Lightning tie it 1:43 later with a power-play goal. Cedric Paquette's goal with 5:41 to play put Tampa Bay up for good. The Lightning controlled the flow of the game and had a 60 percent CF% at 5-on-5 with shots on goal at 37-22. They also dominated scoring chances (33-17) and high-danger chances (12-2) but yet the game didn't seem nearly as lopsided as their first tilt.

Jan. 12: Lightning win 5-3

This time around the Sabres played perhaps their best game against the Lightning but came up short. They led twice at 2-1 in the first period and 3-2 5:54 into the third period when Marco Scandella jumped in for a goal. But 23 seconds later Nikita Kucherov made it 3-3, followed by Steven Stamkos and Ryan Callahan helping put it away in the final 5:16 of the period.

The Sabres had a 37-27 5-on-5 Corsi edge through two periods only to see the Lightning take over with a 21-5 roll in the third. Tampa finished with a 53.3 percent CF% edge for the game and led 20-18 in scoring chances. The Sabres had the better of high-danger chances, 12-8. Of course, a loss is a loss is a loss and the Sabres aren't here for moral victories.

"They're a good team. Whenever you play against other top players or top teams in the league you try to elevate your game," Sabres defenseman Zach Bogosian said. "You know you have to be a tight-checking team against teams like that. They're going to make plays; they're a super high-powered offense. I thought we did a good job

limiting them to the outside the first two periods but obviously they made it count in the third. I liked a lot with what we did tonight.”

The Lightning are the best in the NHL for many reasons. The 20 skaters they put out each night are arguably the most complete group across the league. Their goal differential is +60 with Toronto next in line at +36 (Buffalo is +1). They’re not about to be crowned, but the Sabres aren’t getting clowned by them either.

When the two meet for the final time in mid-February at Amalie Arena in Tampa, it’ll be the final time the Sabres can measure up against them. By that time the Sabres should know where exactly they’re at as well, and the Lightning will be ready for them as always.

These games can’t always just be measured on the basis of shots attempted, what with turnovers, power plays and goalies all being factors among others, but the Sabres are going to be a top team in the NHL, and being able to beat the best at what they do well goes a long way to that. It’s one thing to know it but it’s something else to pull it off.

“They’re just such a complete team,” Bogosian said. “I think they’ve been good for a while and they know they’re going to get every team’s best so they’re probably comfortable in those games. I wouldn’t say we have to play a perfect game because I think the beauty of the NHL is any team can beat anyone on any given night, but at the end of the day you can tell they’re comfortable in those tight games.”

In a season loaded with different kinds of challenges, the Sabres measuring themselves against the best in the league, even despite the results, shows where they’re headed. Now it’s time to see if they can buckle down with the rest of the Eastern Conference playoff contenders and not get caught up in game-to-game emotions.

Sabres goalie Carter Hutton having rough stretch after fast start

By Bill Hoppe
Olean Times Herald
January 13, 2019

BUFFALO – On Dec. 13, goalie Carter Hutton made 25 saves in a 3-1 win over Arizona, improving to 13-8-1 in his first season with the Sabres.

At that point, Hutton's campaign was going splendidly. The loquacious veteran had quickly become the No. 1 netminder the Sabres envisioned when they signed the career backup to a three-year, \$8.25 million contract July 1.

But since then, Hutton, 33, has lost seven of his last eight starts (1-5-2) entering Monday's tilt against the Edmonton Oilers, the start of a five-game road trip.

His slump started in Washington two nights after beating the Coyotes. Early in the 4-3 shootout loss to the Capitals, Hutton mishandled the puck behind the net, leading to Brett Connolly's tying goal.

As Hutton, one of the league's best puck-handlers, kept slinging it all over the ice earlier this season, the Sabres raved about how that element made them a better team.

Still, Hutton has rarely utilized that skill since his gaffe. After Connolly's goal, the Sabres possibly told him to handle it less.

Hutton hasn't exactly been playing poorly. He has a 2.86 goals-against average and a .909 save percentage in his last eight games. Yes, he needs to be better if the Sabres, who have fallen out of a playoff spot, hope to move up.

The UMass Lowell product looked weak on Sean Kuraly's overtime winner in a 3-2 loss to the Boston Bruins on Dec. 29, giving up a juicy rebound.

Hutton also couldn't glove Brock Nelson's shot Dec. 31, and the puck dropped in the net for the winning goal in a 2-1 loss to the New York Islanders.

The Sabres have given Hutton little margin for error. Their goal support for him – just 1.9 a game in his seven recent losses – has been atrocious.

Some bad luck has also hurt Hutton. In Friday's 4-3 loss in Carolina, three odd bounces – one of the Hurricanes' goals went off the top of the net and in off his back – victimized Hutton.

Meanwhile, backup goalie Linus Ullmark, 25, has outplayed Hutton over the last month. The Swede impressed the Sabres enough during his four-game winning streak – his teammates scored 15 goals for him – he earned a second consecutive start Jan. 5 in Boston, making 39 saves in a 2-1 loss.

It's unclear who will start Monday. Ullmark made 25 saves in Saturday's 5-3 loss to the Tampa Bay Lightning. If he had won, it's very likely Sabres coach Phil Housley would've gone back to him.

Having fallen so far so quickly – the Sabres ranked first overall Nov. 29 – Housley likely has to ride the hot hand down the stretch.

Overall, Hutton (14-3-3, 2.62 and .916 in 30 games) and Ullmark (9-3-3, 2.84 and .920 in 16 contests) have similar numbers.

A splendid road record helped buoy the Sabres' hot start. But they've lost four straight contests and have a 9-10-3 record away from KeyBank Center, where they don't play again until Feb. 1. They haven't won a road game since beating Boston 4-2 on Dec. 16.

After tonight's game, the Sabres play the Calgary Flames on Wednesday and the Vancouver Canucks on Friday. Following a bye week and the NHL All-Star break, the trip resumes Jan. 29 against the Columbus Blue Jackets and ends a day later versus the Dallas Stars.

"It's going to be tough," Sabres defenseman Marco Scandella said of the trip. "But I feel like once our backs are against the wall, we play our best hockey. We're going to go on the road, simplify and grind out games. I'm very confident in this group. We're going to go out and have a good road trip."

When the Sabres went through Alberta and Vancouver last January, they went 3-0, playing perhaps their three most complete games of the season.

The Sabres had Sunday off before flying to Edmonton.

Notes: With a helper on winger Sam Reinhart's goal Saturday, Sabres rookie Rasmus Dahlin became the seventh defenseman in NHL history to reach 20 assists before his 19th birthday. Housley compiled 40 assists before he turned 19, the most ever. ... The NHL has fined Lightning defenseman Mikhail Sergachev \$2,403.67, the maximum allowable under the collective bargaining agreement, for cross-checking Sabres center Johan Larsson on Saturday. ... Superstar Connor McDavid missed the Oilers' skills competition Sunday because he was sick, according to the Edmonton Journal.

Sabres lose to Lightning, fall out of playoff spot

By Bill Hoppe
Olean Times Herald
January 12, 2019

BUFFALO – Twenty games ago, the upstart Sabres grabbed the top spot in the NHL after winning their 10th straight contest.

At that point, 25 games into the season, the Sabres appeared ahead of schedule. While many observers believed they could possibly contend for a playoff spot, few thought they would be the league's best team more than a quarter into the campaign.

Fast forward to today, and the Sabres have fallen hard. Yes, they're still much better than a year ago, when they finished dead last. But they're 6-10-4 since their long winning streak ended.

Saturday's 5-3 loss to the heavyweight Tampa Bay Lightning coupled with the Montreal Canadiens' victory pushed the Sabres one point out of a playoff spot.

"We're right there, we're right in the hunt, that's where we wanted to be at the start of the year," said Sabres winger Sam Reinhart, who scored his 10th goal. "We've got to embrace that challenge and get back to putting points up more consistently."

The Sabres had the Lightning on the ropes before the capacity crowd of 19,070 inside KeyBank Center. It could've been the kind of win that would ignite their season.

The Sabres went up 3-2 when defenseman Marco Scandella zoomed in through the slot and connected on Jason Pominville's saucer pass 5:54 into the third period.

Then the Sabres imploded. The lead lasted 23 seconds.

Lightning superstar Nikita Kucherov tied it before setting up captain Steven Stamkos' go-ahead goal at 14:44 during a four-on-four with Sabres star Jack Eichel off for a questionable elbowing penalty.

"They're deep, for sure," Pominville said. "Their top guys right now are playing phenomenal hockey for them."

Ryan Callahan's late power-play goal then sealed the game.

"We've got to fight and keep clawing away," Sabres coach Phil Housley said. "We knew that nothing was going to be easy from this point moving forward, and I think that's a valuable lesson for our guys that it's going to take every shift, every period, every game, a 60-minute effort. We can't take anything for granted."

"But at the same time, I think there's a lot of valuable lessons that we're learning. If we play a 60-minute game like we're capable, we'll get on the right side of things. We're facing a little adversity here and we have to overcome that."

Forty-five days ago, the Sabres roared into Tampa Bay first overall. While they lost 5-4 and fell one point behind the Lightning, the end of their raucous run felt like the start of something special.

It seemed like the foes could be battling for the Atlantic Division's top spot all season.

Well, since that night, Tampa Bay is a stunning 18-1-1.

The NHL's best club is now 20 point ahead of the Sabres.

How good are the Bolts? They're 35-8-2 overall, an astonishing mark in an age of parity.

At their current pace, they would win 64 games, one more than NHL record of 62 the Detroit Red Wings set during their 131-point campaign in 1995-96. They're also on pace for 131 points, one less than the record of 132 the Montreal Canadiens set in 1976-77.

Tage Thompson scored the Sabres' other goal, giving them a 2-1 lead late in the first period after falling behind 26 seconds in. Goalie Linus Ullmark made 25 saves during just his third regulation loss in 16 appearances this season.

"The lesson is – and I've said it before – every shift and every play matters, especially against good teams," Housley said. "You have to make the right decisions at the right times. You have to take what the game gives you."

Sabres notes: Kyle Okposo showcasing more physicality

By Bill Hoppe
Olean Times Herald
January 12, 2019

BUFFALO – Over the last week or two, Sabres winger Kyle Okposo has finally started showcasing signs of his old self, playing a heavier, straight-line game.

“He’s going to the net a lot better,” Sabres coach Phil Housley said prior to Saturday’s 5-3 loss to the Tampa Bay Lightning inside KeyBank Center. “I think he’s attacking off the wing and he’s shooting a lot more.”

Not surprisingly, Okposo has started scoring a bit. After enduring a career-worst 21-game goal drought – he was pointless in the last 14 outings of that rough run – Okposo had compiled two goals and three points in the last five contests entering Saturday.

“The last eight, probably nine games now I’ve played better,” said Okposo, who scored Friday. “I just have to keep going, keep being hungry to score. I think I’m doing a lot of things well not in the offensive zone that are leading to more offensive zone time and offensive zone chances.”

Being a bullish power forward is Okposo’s bread and butter. It has helped him score 18 or more goals in a season seven times and become an NHL All-Star.

“I like the physicality he’s bringing,” Housley said. “He’s finishing his checks. I think it gets him into the game more, and now he’s just playing the game instead of thinking the game.”

Okposo scored seven goals and 18 points in his first 44 games. Those number, of course, hardly match his seven-year, \$42 million contract.

Still, following a full summer of training – he couldn’t do that in 2017 as he was recovering from a scary concussion – he enjoyed a solid start this season, scoring five goals and 14 points in the first 22 games.

It’s not crazy to think Okposo could finish strongly and flirt with 20 goals.

Okposo has spent the last two weeks skating beside center Johan Larsson and another winger on what could be considered the fourth line. Right away, the move helped buoy Okposo.

“He does a really good job in the defensive zone of coming low and supporting the puck,” Okposo said. “He’s been kind of creating that momentum up the ice. He makes it easy for you to give him the puck, and then he comes up with speed through the middle of the ice, so you’re able to play more in the offensive.”

“He does a really good job down low in the defensive zone being hard on guys, being physical, killing the play and then we’re able to go play offense. He’s played great this year and he’s definitely helped out my game, too.”

–

Sabres winger Jeff Skinner scored 30 goals in only 44 games, tying him with Rick Martin as the sixth-fastest Sabre to reach the mark.

Only Alexander Mogilny (30 games in 1992-93), Pat LaFontaine (31 games in 1991-92 and 42 in 1992-92), Gilbert Perreault (40 games in 1977-78) and Martin (41 games in 1973-74) reached the milestone faster.

Hours before scoring his 30th in Friday’s 4-3 loss to the Hurricanes, Skinner, 26, was voted into the NHL All-Star Game as part of the NHL’s “Last Men In” online balloting.

“To see the passion of the fans and to see them sort of rewarded is a pretty cool feeling,” Skinner told reporters in Carolina.

—

After recording a goal and three points Saturday, Lightning winger Nikita Kucherov has already compiled 22 goals and 75 points, putting the Russian on pace for a whopping 137 points. That would be the NHL's highest total since Jaromir Jagr had a 127-point season in 1998-99.

Fresh off his first 100-point season, Kucherov, 25, has morphed into perhaps the league's best player and the leading Hart Trophy candidate.

"I don't think it's another level, I just think it's that's how good he is," Lightning captain Steven Stamkos said. "We saw it last year, we're seeing it this year. We've seen it for a long time now, he's one of the best in the league."

He added: "He's on another level in terms of the way he sees the game and when he has the puck on his stick, usually some very good things are going to happen. He just always continues to get better. He's working on his craft all the time. That's why you're seeing what you're seeing."

Notes: The Sabres scratched defenseman Matt Hunwick for the 10th straight game. Meanwhile, defenseman Nathan Beaulieu sat out his fifth consecutive contest. They also scratched winger Remi Elie. ... The Sabres don't play another home game until Feb. 1 against Chicago. ... In his first game with the Rochester Americans following a four-game stint with the Sabres, winger C.J. Smith scored a hat trick in Saturday afternoon's 5-1 road win against the Toronto Marlies.

Lightning could become one of best teams in NHL history

By Bill Hoppe
Olean Times Herald
January 12, 2019

BUFFALO – Forty-four days ago, the first-place Sabres roared into Tampa Bay enjoying a 10-game winning streak. While they lost 5-4 and fell one point behind the Lightning, the end of their raucous run felt like the start of something special.

It seemed like the foes could be battling for the Atlantic Division's top spot all season.

Well, since that night, the Sabres are 6-9-4. Tampa Bay, meanwhile, is a stunning 17-1-1.

Yes, Tampa Bay has really earned 35 of a possible 38 points. The NHL's best club has an 18-point lead on the Sabres entering tonight's tilt inside KeyBank Center.

How good are the Bolts? They're 34-8-2 overall, an astonishing mark in an age of parity.

At their current pace, they would win 63 games, one more than NHL record of 62 the Detroit Red Wings set during their 131-point campaign in 1995-96. They're also on pace for 130 points, two less than the record of 132 the Montreal Canadiens set in 1976-77.

Lightning winger Nikita Kucherov has already compiled 21 goals and 72 points, putting the Russian on pace for a whopping 134 points. That would be the NHL's highest total since Jaromir Jagr had a 127-point season in 1998-99.

Fresh off his first 100-point season, Kucherov, 25, has morphed into perhaps the league's best player and the leading Hart Trophy candidate.

"I don't think it's another level, I just think it's that's how good he is," Lightning captain Steven Stamkos said this morning. "We saw it last year, we're seeing it this year. We've seen it for a long time now, he's one of the best in the league."

He added: "He's on another level in terms of the way he sees the game and when he has the puck on his stick, usually some very good things are going to happen. He just always continues to get better. He's working on his craft all the time. That's why you're seeing what you're seeing."

In other news, the Sabres, who lost 4-3 Friday in Carolina, had this morning off. Coach Phil Housley will address the media this afternoon.

Backup goalie Louis Domingue will start for the Lightning.

Update: Housley said goalie Linus Ullmark will start tonight, his 16th appearance this season. The rest of the lineup will remain the same, meaning defenseman Nathan Beaulieu will be scratched for the fifth straight game.

The Sabres defeated Tampa Bay here 2-1 on Nov. 13.

Reinhart on being bumped for Wild Card: "There's no time to dwell on it"

By Nick Filipowski

WIVB

January 13, 2019

BUFFALO, N.Y. (WIVB) - On November 28, the Sabres were the best team in the NHL.

They led the league and the Atlantic with 36 points and were riding high on a 10-game winning streak.

Since then, the Blue & Gold have been in a perpetual free fall from the top of the standings.

The Sabres are 6-10-4 over their last 20 games and have officially been pushed out of a playoff spot -- they're now on the outside looking in at the postseason picture.

Is it time to panic? No -- there is still plenty of hockey left.

Following their 5-3 loss to Tampa Bay on Saturday, Head Coach Phil Housley said if the team starts to play a more complete game, they'll be right back in the mix. Players feel the same.

"We have a great locker room, we believe in each other so we just have to get right back on track," said defenseman Marco Scandella. "It's going to start with the next game. We're a very confident group this year so I have no worries."

"There's frustration, yeah. There's no time to dwell on it. We're right there, we're right in the hunt and that's where we wanted to be at the start of the year," added forward Sam Reinhart. "So, we have to embrace that challenge and putting up points more consistently."

Buffalo will look to do that on their three game road trip out West when they battle Edmonton, Calgary and Vancouver before the All-Star break. Last season, the Blue & Gold won all three games.

"It's really important," Housley said when asked about bouncing back before the All-Star break. "Every game is important, it doesn't matter if we're home or on the road. We have to apply a 60 minute effort and recognize the mistakes we're making and try to overcome those and learn from them as we move forward."

Bolts best Sabres 5-3

By Nick Filipowski

WIVB

January 12, 2019

BUFFALO, N.Y. (WIVB) - Steven Stamkos broke a 3-3 tie late in the third period to help lift Tampa Bay past the Sabres 5-3 Saturday night at KeyBank Center.

The goal, didn't come without controversy, as Jack Eichel was sent to the box on an elbowing call which nullified Buffalo's 5-on-4 opportunity.

Playing 4-on-4 hockey, as Nikita Kucherov skated up the ice and into the Sabres' zone with Stamkos, he drop passed back to the Bolts' captain, who sent the puck over the shoulder of Linus Ullmark for his 24th of the season.

"The lesson is every shift and every play matters," head coach Phil Housley said after the game when asked what he and the pull from their close losses to Tampa. "Especially, against good teams."

"You can't blame the refs, it's a fast game out there, they're making calls," said Eichel. "We just have to find a way. It feels like we're close. We just have to get over that hump."

With the win, Tampa Bay improved to 18-1-1 over its last 20 games, while the Sabres dipped to 6-10-4 over that same span.

The Sabres entered the night holding onto the Eastern Conference's final Wild Card spot with 52 points.

But now Buffalo, which led the Atlantic Division on Nov. 28, is on the outside looking in at the playoff picture as the Canadiens jumped them in the standings with a 3-0 win over Colorado.

"Just be more focused, can't make mistakes at the end of the game," said Marco Scandella. "We have to be confident and play well in the last five (minutes) and seal the deal. I just feel like a game like tonight, we just made too many mistakes at the end."

"We put ourselves in a position to win a hockey game, it was just unfortunate," added Housley. "It was a game of mistakes and we made the wrong mistakes at the wrong time."

The Lightning only managed six shots in the first period but opening the scoring 26 seconds in as Brayden Point tapped his 29th goal of the season following an offensive zone faceoff.

After Sam Reinhart tied the game at one with his 10th goal of the season, Tage Thompson helped the Sabres steal momentum at the end of the period, tapping in his sixth of the season with 10 seconds to play.

However, Tampa Bay would tally the only goal in the second with Ondrej Palat netting his sixth of the season as well.

Scandella scored the third goal for Buffalo, burying a feed from Jason Pominville.

Ryan Callahan added Tampa's fifth and final goal with 1:19 remaining in the game.

Late mistakes prove costly in loss to Lightning

By Jourdon LaBarber

Sabres.com

January 12, 2019

Jack Eichel was left to weigh the good with the bad at his stall in the KeyBank Center dressing room on Saturday, in the aftermath of one that got away.

The Sabres stood toe-to-toe with the Tampa Bay Lightning for 50-plus minutes, tied 3-3 when Mikhail Sergachev was assessed a double-minor for high-sticking with 6:33 remaining. Eichel was called for elbowing behind the Tampa net 13 seconds into the Buffalo power play, and the game unfolded from there.

Steven Stamkos scored the winner during four-on-four play with 5:16 remaining, Lawrence Pilut was called for holding two minutes later and Ryan Callahan added another goal on the ensuing power play, sealing a 5-3 win for the Lightning.

"I thought we worked hard," Eichel said. "Obviously, we didn't get the outcome we wanted. I thought there was a lot of good there for us. You're tied in your own building going into the third. It's frustrating that it ends like that, but you can't blame the refs.

"... I think we've just got to find a way. It feels like we're close right now. We've just got to get over that hump."

The Sabres have now held third-period leads in all three of their meetings with the Lightning, who hold a 10-point lead over second-place Calgary in the race for the Presidents' Trophy. On this night, the lead came in the form of a Marco Scandella goal that broke a 2-2 tie at 5:54 in the third.

The Lightning responded just 23 seconds later, capitalizing on a defensive-zone turnover forced along the boards by Stamkos, who fed Nikita Kucherov for the tying goal.

"We made a big mistake to the wrong people," Sabres coach Phil Housley said. "They can turn around and attack pretty quickly, so that was unfortunate. ... We put ourselves in position to win a hockey game. It's just unfortunate. It's a game of mistakes. We made the wrong mistakes at the wrong time."

The call against Eichel came on a collision between him and Ryan McDonagh, with officials ruling that the Sabres captain made contact with the defenseman's head. Eichel disagreed with that assessment, but showed empathy toward the referees' predicament.

"It's tough," he said. "It's such a fast game. For me, it's a rim going around. If you look at it again, I don't lift my arm, I don't move my elbow. I'm really just poking at the puck with my stick trying to avoid him, honestly, to try and get the puck.

"Incidental contact, I don't really even know how much I clipped him. Refs, they've got to make a decision at that point, it's tough on them too so I don't want to blame anyone in that situation."

Housley pointed to Stamkos' winning goal as an example of the attention to detail the Sabres need to have late in games, citing an ill-timed change as the reason the Lightning captain had ample space to shoot. He beat Linus Ullmark top-shelf with a shot to the far-side corner.

"We have some penalties going on where it's four-on-four," Housley said. "It's a situation, we're changing, they have two of the best players on the ice in the game. We put our forward in sort of a bad position there on the rush. You can't give those opportunities to players like that coming right down the slot."

There were examples of the Sabres' upward potential, too, particularly during a first period in which they outshot the Lightning by a 16-6 margin. Brayden Point opened the scoring for Tampa Bay just 26 seconds into the contest, but Sam Reinhart and Tage Thompson scored goals to give Buffalo a 2-1 lead heading into intermission.

"I thought we came out hard and we were playing the right way, shooting the puck, controlling the play," Scandella said. "So yeah, definitely, that's how we have to play."

The Sabres have three games remaining ahead of their bye week, all on the road during a swing through Western Canada. Scandella issued a vote of confidence going forward.

"It's going to be tough," he said. "But I feel like once our backs are against the wall, we play our best hockey. We're going to go on the road, simplify and grind out games. I'm very confident in this group. We're going to go out and have a good road trip."

Up next

The Sabres kick off their road trip with a visit to play Connor McDavid and the Edmonton Oilers on Monday night. Coverage on MSG-B begins at 8:30 p.m. with the GMC Game Night pregame show, or you can listen live on WGR 550. The puck drops at 9.

Sabres look to rebound at home vs. Lightning

By Jourdon LaBarber

Sabres.com

January 12, 2019

Linus Ullmark will start in net when the Buffalo Sabres host the league-leading Tampa Bay Lightning tonight at KeyBank Center.

Ullmark is coming off a 39-save effort in the team's 2-1 loss in Boston last Saturday, which snapped a four-game personal winning streak. The rest of the lineup will remain unchanged from Buffalo's 4-3 loss in Carolina on Friday.

The loss to the Hurricanes could be chalked up in part to bad bounces - three of the Hurricanes' goals went in off Sabres players - but Phil Housley stressed the need for better decision making if they're to have a better outcome against the Lightning.

"I think, number one, we're going to have to manage the puck again," the Sabres coach said. "I think at times we didn't make the right decisions. There's plays to be made and there's not plays to be made, and putting the puck behind them and going to work on the forecheck is a play in its own right."

"... We have to be comfortable in a situation where it's a tight game and not force things that aren't there. Just take what the game gives us. Sometimes we get a little bit uncomfortable and we're trying to make a play, we're trying with the right intentions, but we've just got to take what the game gives us."

It will be the third meeting of the season between the two Atlantic Division rivals, with the home team having won each of the first two matchups. The Sabres won 2-1 in Buffalo on Nov. 13, then lost 5-4 in Tampa on Nov. 29.

The Lightning has separated itself from the rest of the NHL in the time since that last meeting, sporting a 17-1-1 record in its last 19 games. Tampa Bay leads the league in goals per game (4.09) and has the No. 1-ranked power play at 30 percent. Nikita Kucherov leads the league with 71 points.

"It's a tremendous challenge for us," Housley said. "We get another crack at it right after a big game playing the best team in the league. There's not a lot of motivation you need right now to play this team."

"We've been playing well at home, we need to start the way we've started in the past at home and just play 60 minutes."

Coverage on MSG-B begins at 6:30 p.m. with the GMC Game Night pregame show, or you can listen live on WGR 550. The puck drops at 7.