



Buffalo Sabres

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Travis Yost's Sabre Metrics: Power play problems start with lack of depth

By Travis Yost
The Buffalo News
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At the heart of Buffalo Sabres' talk over the last two months: How to turn the team back in the right direction?

The hot-and-cold first half has been exhaustively discussed. From the opening of the regular season until Thanksgiving, the Sabres accumulated more points in the standings than any other team in the league. And since then, the Sabres have reversed course, accumulating fewer points than any other team in the league. It's been dizzying to say the least.

One of the areas that I've become increasingly curious is the power play. Despite the talent that would seemingly lend itself well to a productive unit on the man advantage, coach Phil Housley's team hasn't realized much success.

Under the same split of the first half of the season, the numbers are comparatively jarring: In the first two months of the year, the Sabres averaged 6.8 goals per 60 minutes, and since Thanksgiving, they are down to 4.8 goals per 60 minutes. The league average is around 7.2 goals per 60 minutes. Buffalo's power play has been underwhelming all season, and notably so in the last two months.

The depth issues that unfavorably affect this team at 5-on-5 are just as impactful on the power play. If you look at how each regular Buffalo skater has performed relative to peers around the league and then relative to one another, it becomes obvious that if Buffalo's PP1 doesn't produce, the team doesn't produce.

First, let's look at the rate at which Buffalo's skaters generate goals relative to league average. We know that the average NHL skater on the power play is averaging about seven goals per 60 minutes on the man advantage and expected goal rates (I'll use Corsica as a quick reference tool here) are relatively similar. To that end, we can measure the deltas for every regular Sabres skater season to date. Here's what that looks like, with the size of each bubble corresponding to the amount of ice time each player has seen up a man:

The Sabres have a core trio of skaters who provide power play production, and that includes Jeff Skinner, Jack Eichel and Rasmus Dahlin. It is almost perfectly collinear with the top-heavy issues the team experiences at 5-on-5, where goal scoring rates plummet as soon as those skaters leave the ice.

The issue for Buffalo is that their second power-play unit has really been blundered to death and there really haven't been many success stories. Players such as Casey Mittelstadt and Jason Pominville have probably been a bit unlucky, sure, but it is more than a bit concerning that those numbers haven't fully regressed by this point of the season.

The larger issue is with the four skaters at the bottom of the graph – Rasmus Ristolainen, Sam Reinhart, Kyle Okposo and Conor Sheary. For the most part, we are talking about guys with well more than a hundred minutes on the power play individually. Although their opportunity has been a bit neutered having played on the second unit for large segments of the season, the lack of production is a problem.

If I were to tell you that the average power play skater was on the ice for one more goal per 60 minutes than the likes of Reinhart and Okposo, and that the expected goal rates (to eliminate the effects of randomness) were very similar, how would you react? Because ultimately that's what Buffalo is seeing these days.

We can punch these numbers out for a more direct head-to-head comparison, knowing that Buffalo's operational norm is less than the league average. Here is how every Sabres skater compares to one another – directionally it's still the same, but I think it speaks a little more clearly to the depth challenges in Buffalo:

Striking the same note can get a little tiring after a while, but the reality is Buffalo's depth issues are fundamental to why this team is in the thick of a playoff race despite a 10-game win streak that should have solidified a playoff spot. Moreover, it does beg the question as to whether the Sabres should jump into the forward trade market come February. There's been a lot of talk about whether the Sabres should punt on the season to

preserve as many assets as possible for their true test year in 2019, but as of right now, they are a literal coin flip to earn a postseason bid.

If given those odds at the start of the season, would General Manager Jason Botterill have signaled his front office into buy mode? I suspect that is the case. But for now, we have another month to see if the Sabres can skate themselves out of this funk.

Sabres Notebook: Jeff Skinner, Jack Eichel avoid injuries in collision

By Mike Harrington

The Buffalo News

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All-Stars Jeff Skinner and Jack Eichel were back at practice Monday after spending their weekend in San Jose and everything at HarborCenter was routine.

Then Skinner went down, slid across the ice and accidentally took out Eichel below the knees as the Buffalo captain frantically tried to avoid the collision. Both players were unhurt and left to sheepishly smile about the near-miss afterward.

The team had just switched from the smaller of HarborCenter's two rinks to a fresh sheet of ice on the feature rink when Skinner lost his balance and skidded at full speed into Eichel. Skinner quickly hopped to his feet and Eichel, who initially looked a little shaken up by the collision, slowly skated over to the boards to collect himself and then rejoined drills a couple minutes later.

"I didn't want to hurt Jack. I knew I was all right," Skinner said. "It wasn't a good feeling. You're falling on your pants there and you don't have much control of where you're going or how to stop. But he's got pretty good reflexes and got out of the way pretty quick, so he was all right."

The incident was reminiscent of a 2012 practice collision in KeyBank Center when Sabres defenseman Jordan Leopold skidded on the ice and took out coach Lindy Ruff from behind. Ruff crashed to the ice on his back and suffered three broken ribs, forcing him to watch the next few games from the press box rather than the bench.

The difference here was that Skinner was coming from the front, so Eichel saw the oncoming collision.

"It's good that we're able to laugh about it," said a chuckling Eichel. "I think he lost an edge there. That could have been pretty bad, so it was good it wasn't."

Both players will be fine for Tuesday's game in Columbus. The Sabres return to play after the break four points out of the last playoff spot in the Eastern conference and are just 3-6-1 in their last 10 games. After playing the Blue Jackets, they are in Dallas Wednesday before opening a seven-game homestand Friday against Chicago.

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Eichel said his trip to the All-Star Game was a fruitful one for his burgeoning memorabilia stash.

"I got some cool things," he said. "I got my game jersey signed by all the East guys. I got a stick signed by everyone in the game again and I grabbed one of [Sidney] Crosby's sticks. That was pretty cool. I'd been waiting on one of those for a little bit. I have an Alex Ovechkin stick, too."

Eichel said in San Jose he made a similar haul at last year's game in Tampa, adding his first career All-Star jersey to other key ones from his career, including his Team North America sweater from the 2016 World Cup of Hockey.

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The Sabres' power play is 0 for 13 over the last four games, 1 for 22 in the last eight games and just 4 for 41 in the last 14. Coach Phil Housley's latest tinkering Monday was to try a four-forward unit. Kyle Okposo joined Eichel, Skinner, Sam Reinhart and Ramsus Ristolainen on the top unit.

"Scoring chances don't count anymore. We have to have production," Housley said of his power play, which is 21st in the NHL at 17 percent. "There's time in the past 10 games we've had really good opportunities and the goalies have made good saves. That's not an excuse. It's all about production."

The second unit Monday had Casey Mittelstadt between Evan Rodrigues and Conor Sheary, with Rasmus Dahlin and Tage Thompson in the rear.

"It's a good time to work on it today, move the puck around, keep it simple," Housley said. "We used Kyle back on that flank and I thought both units moved the puck really well. We've got to work on it because we're not getting the results.

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The Sabres have sat for 11 days, watching teams pull ahead of them in the standings but now they get a chance to play while teams in front of them like Montreal and Toronto go on their bye week.

Buffalo is seven points behind the third-place Canadiens in the Atlantic Division but has three games in hand.

"It's uncomfortable because you're seeing teams, particularly Montreal, keep winning and those games in hand and just what they are: games in hand," Housley said. "You still have to get results in them. I think it's a good thing for us, a challenge for us. This is where we've wanted to be. ... I'm excited to see how our guys are going to react to that challenge."

Casey Mittelstadt looks to pick up where he left off before Sabres break

By Mike Harrington

The Buffalo News

January 28, 2019

For Casey Mittelstadt, the season has to be looked at in baby steps. He spent his bye week and All-Star break feeling better about how things are going. Two goals in six games will do that.

Mittelstadt has been up and down in the Buffalo Sabres' lineup. Being a No. 2 center in the NHL has proved daunting at times, too daunting to the point he's spent some games down in the pecking order. But Mittelstadt has been back on the second line the last couple days and should be there Tuesday night between Conor Sheary and Evan Rodrigues when the Sabres take the ice for the first time in 11 days with a game against the Columbus Blue Jackets in Nationwide Arena.

Mittelstadt scored one of the Sabres' five second-period goals in their Jan. 8 win over New Jersey and scored the game's opening goal one minute into the 7-2 loss Jan. 14 in Edmonton.

"It was good for sure, made my break a little less stressful," Mittelstadt said Monday after the team practiced in HarborCenter. "I got a couple good bounces and it gives you a better feeling that you want to keep going."

Mittelstadt has three points in the last six games. By comparison, he had only one goal and three points in the previous 19 games. He piled up points in high school, the United States Hockey League and had 30 points in 34 games last year at the University of Minnesota. But this is a different world.

"I try not to put too much on myself but that's not the easiest thing for me," he said. "You have to balance it out. There are some nights you're just chasing the puck around and that's how it goes. And that can happen even in high school, too. You just stay with it, believe in what you're doing, that it will pay off and that you'll get chances. Just be ready for them when they come."

Of course, one reason Mittelstadt's offense isn't where he'd like it to be is because a center in the NHL has been stellar defensively. There's been nightly lessons in that area. He has a minus-6 rating for the season and has a 47 percent Corsi rating at even strength, ahead of only Vladimir Sobotka and Tage Thompson among the team's 12 regular forwards.

"It's tough. You have to play a 200-foot game in this league," said Sabres coach Phil Housley. "A lot of times when you're the low forward, you've got to be very well aware defensively to help out the defense. You have to get up on the attack. When you're first in on the forecheck, then you have to come back all the way."

"You have to keep body position," Mittelstadt said. "There's so many little things that older guys in the NHL know how to do that I've never had to worry about. Giving a guy a step in this league is a lot different than giving a guy a step in college. That's been the main thing I've learned for sure."

Mittelstadt's assignment is a tough one. He's a 20-year-old rookie in his first full NHL season while Sabres fans are watching the departed Ryan O'Reilly put up a big year in St. Louis and be named one of four finalists for the MVP award at Saturday night's All-Star Game in San Jose. Sending O'Reilly off and giving Mittelstadt a big role is a long-term play.

O'Reilly, of course, is a polished product. Mittelstadt is not.

"I've gone everywhere and put up points and been able to make plays every night pretty much," Mittelstadt said. "It's been new and I've had to learn things. I'm getting much more comfortable so I'm ready to really get going here now this second half. I'm always hard on myself so at times it gets tough. This is good for me to learn a lot about being patient."

"I think he's been adjusting well and I really like the play of our young guys going into the break," Housley said. "I think Rasmus Dahlin has played his best hockey right before the break. Hopefully they can build off that going forward but it's a difficult task, especially on the road when you're not going to get the matchups you want."

The Sabres have a tough matchup against a Columbus team that's four points behind the New York Islanders for the Metropolitan Division lead. The Blue Jackets posted a 5-4 overtime decision over Buffalo on Oct. 27 in the Ohio capital, a wildly entertaining game that was won on a goal by Artemi Panarin. Mittelstadt had forged a tie at 4:30 of the third period, helping the Sabres wipe out a two-goal deficit with his first goal of the season.

"It was a back and forth, back and forth game," he recalled. "We scored right away (on a Kyle Okposo goal at 1:38), they came back, we came back. They're fast, physical and aggressive. We're going to have to be ready to go coming out of the break."

Four-forward approach another option for Sabres' slumping power play

By Mike Harrington

The Buffalo News

January 28, 2019

The Buffalo Sabres' power play has dropped to 21st in the NHL at 17 percent and the lack of offense with the man advantage has been a big contributor to the team's struggles in recent weeks.

Coach Phil Housley tinkered with a four-forward approach in practice Monday that had Kyle Okposo joining Jack Eichel, Jeff Skinner, Sam Reinhart and Rasmus Ristolainen. The Sabres may use it during Tuesday's game in Columbus.

"Scoring chances don't count anymore. We have to have production," Housley said. "There's time in the past 10 games we've had really good opportunities and the goalies have made good saves. That's not an excuse. It's all about production."

The second unit Monday had Casey Mittelstadt between Evan Rodrigues and Conor Sheary, with Rasmus Dahlin and Tage Thompson in the rear.

The Sabres' power play is 0 for 13 over the last four games, just 1 for 22 in the last eight games and 4 for 41 in the last 14. The next two games will be a tough challenge as Columbus is eighth in the NHL on the penalty kill and Dallas is seventh.

"It's a good time to work on it today, move the puck around, keep it simple," Housley said. "We used Kyle back on that flank and I thought both units moved the puck really well. We've got to work on it because we're not getting the results."

The Sabres are looking to get a stagnant power play going

By Paul Hamilton

WGR 550

January 28, 2019

Buffalo, NY (WGR 550) - The Sabres' power play has gone stale in the last 10 games, but it's still ranked 21st in the NHL at 17-percent. Phil Housley had them practicing it for quite a while on Monday. He said, "Scoring chances don't count anymore, we have to have production. There's times in the past 10 games where we've had really good opportunities and the goalie has made some good saves, but that's not an excuse, it's all about production."

"We'll get some different looks with some different personnel, so we used Kyle back on that flank and we've got to work at it right now because we're not getting the results."

The first power play unit consisted of Jack Eichel, Jeff Skinner, Sam Reinhart, Kyle Okposo and Rasmus Ristolainen. The second unit was Evan Rodrigues, Casey Mittelstadt, Tage Thompson and Rasmus Dahlin. Conor Sheary and Jason Pominville alternated on the wing.

The Sabres have nine defensemen in practice now that Casey Nelson is back from injury. Lawrence Pilut has stayed up, which means Housley has had to scratch two defensemen. He said, "I've made decisions earlier in the season when we were having a lot more success, it was easier to change guys when we were winning or losing, but now it's been driven by results and are we getting the results? We've got eight very good defensemen that can play so it's tough decisions and it falls on me to make the right one."

There are other things Housley has been working on too. He said, "It's important to get back to where we're harder to play against in our own zone and harder to play against when we have the puck."

With these NHL bye weeks, the Sabres had to sit and watch other teams get points while they were off. Now, Toronto and Montreal are off and it's Buffalo's turn to try to get points. Housley said, "It's uncomfortable, you're seeing teams like Montreal keep winning and those games I think it's a good thing for us, it's a challenge for us. This is where we wanted to be, obviously we want to be in a playoff spot, but we put ourselves in a good position, but it's going to be difficult and I'm excited to see how our guys are going to react to the challenge."

Jack Eichel has been watching and he said it's up to them to take advantage, "It's a good opportunity for us to get a couple of points, so these games are important."

Monday was Eichel's first practice back after the All-Star Game. He said he enjoyed his experience. Eichel is a collector of hockey memorabilia, getting some new stuff at the game. The captain said, "I got some cool things, I got my game jersey and I got that signed by all the guys in the East. I got a stick signed by everybody in the All-Star Game and then I grabbed one of Crosby's sticks and that was pretty cool. I had been waiting on one of those for a little bit and it was really cool to get one of his. I have an Alex Ovechkin stick too, so I have a nice area of memorabilia in my house."

Eichel said he got a chance to rest a little before traveling out to San Jose. He said he feels good and is ready to get back to it, "I was able to mentally recharge and it makes me excited again for the second half of the year. I'm looking forward to playing again and see all the other guys. It's good to get away from them, but I definitely missed them, so it's nice to get back to with all the guys in the room."

Jeff Skinner played in his second All-Star Game. Now that he's back, his focus is on this team and getting it into the playoffs.

Skinner's agent is in contract talks with Jason Botterill. The winger said those discussions will not be a distraction to him, "I don't think it will affect me at all."

"There's too much going on here to worry about, we're right in the mix of the race and every game is going to be huge for us, so as a player, that's more than enough to focus on."

Housley has been saying that he wants to get Matt Hunwick into a game. The head coach would not say if it will happen in Columbus. Hunwick has been practicing for two days with Marco Scandella, while Lawrence Pilut has been working with Nate Beaulieu.

Back to work

By Howard Simon

WGR 550

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I hope you enjoyed your break from Buffalo Sabres hockey. The way things had been going the last quarter of the season, I think we all needed it.

The season resumes on Tuesday night in Columbus and I've put together some information to help you get back into the swing of things.

The biggest question with the Sabres is whether or not they can turn the season back around and end the seven-year playoff drought. If you go back to the final game in the 10-game win streak, to that point of the season, the Sabres had gained 72-percent of the available points. In the 23 games since the win streak ended, Buffalo has picked up just 39-percent of the points. Needless to say that has significantly cut into any playoff optimism among the Sabres faithful.

Right now, the second wild card team in the Eastern Conference is on pace for 98 points. The Sabres are on pace for 92 points.

It would behoove the boys in blue and gold to put together some kind of win streak, but the Sabres haven't won more than two in a row since the 10-game run ended. In fact, they've only won back-to-back games on one occasion, defeating the Los Angeles Kings on December 11 and the Arizona Coyotes two days later.

The Sabres have 34 games left in the regular season, 18 of which will be played at KeyBank Center, including a critical seven-game homestand from February 1 through the 15th. The Sabres are 14-6-3 on home ice, while they are just 10-12-3 on the road. In the last 12 games away from home, the Sabres are an unsightly 2-8-2 and have given up 42 goals.

Of those 34 games, there's an even split of matchups against teams currently in a playoff spot and opponents who are on the outside looking in. There are 22 different teams left on the schedule, and the Sabres' record against those teams this season is 13-13-4.

The Sabres' biggest problem of late has been a leaky defense, and blame can be spread all around from the goalies to the defensemen to the forwards. Contributing factors include giveaways, lapses in defensive zone coverage and a lack of communication. The Sabres have given up three or more goals in each of their last five games (23 goals against) and nine of the last 11 (39 goals allowed).

A number of players need to produce to help the cause:

Carter Hutton's save percentage is just .898 over his last 12 starts.

Conor Sheary has no goals in his last 10 games. His only goal in the last 28 games was an empty netter.

Vladimir Sobotka has five assists in his last eight games, but hasn't scored a goal in the last 32 games.

Jason Pominville has one goal in the last 23 games

Zemgus Girgensons has two goals...for the season

The power play has produced a goal in just four of the last 15 games (4-of-39)

Out of play: With a roster stacked with defensemen, playing time has become scarce for several Sabres

By John Vogl

The Athletic

January 29, 2019

BUFFALO, N.Y. — Good news or bad (and it's usually bad), Matt Hunwick just wants to know.

Is he going to play?

The Sabres have eight healthy defensemen, so two sit on a nightly basis. It's typically Hunwick, and either Nathan Beaulieu or Lawrence Pilut. Practice is a good indicator of who might get in. If Pilut or Beaulieu is working with the power-play unit, he's in — but sometimes it's not obvious.

Hunwick just wants to know.

"They've been pretty good about not keeping us guessing in terms of if we're going to go in," Hunwick said Monday. "The more you know, the clearer things are and the easier it is."

Not that it's easy. Far from it. It's reached the point where Beaulieu would welcome a trade if he's not going to play, even though he loves being in Buffalo.

"I'd like to say it's not that difficult," he said, "but it is."

Coach Phil Housley recognizes the pain in his players. But until general manager Jason Botterill clears the logjam — which might get worse now that injured Casey Nelson is practicing again — there will be two disappointed defensemen on a daily basis.

"We've got eight very good defensemen that can play, so it's tough decisions," Housley said. "It falls on me to make the right one."

Though the coach certainly looks at individual stats, he will only concede that he makes roster decisions based on wins or losses. The Sabres lost Dec. 27 in St. Louis, so Pilut sat for two games. They lost Dec. 31 to the Islanders, so Beaulieu missed five straight. Pilut was part of a losing lineup Jan. 12 against Tampa Bay, so he sat. After Buffalo lost the next game in Edmonton, the defensemen alternated roles again.

"It's sort of been driven by results, so that's what goes into a lot of those decisions," Housley said.

So, who's providing results? Here are the season records for the oft-scratched trio:

*The Sabres are 12-9-5 when Beaulieu plays, including 0-2-2 in his last four.

*They are 6-8-2 with Pilut in the lineup.

*They are 1-1 with Hunwick, with a loss in his last appearance Dec. 18.

"There's really not a lot you can do about the numbers," Hunwick said of having extra defensemen. "Right now, we've been limited to just practice. So, just prepare as best we can and be ready for the next time we get a chance to play."

He gets ready when the others are resting.

"There's a lot of skates where the team's not skating in the morning skate," Hunwick said. "It'll be just three, four guys out there, so it gives you an opportunity to keep working on your puck skills. You have to do extra after regular practice just to keep up. But that's it, really."

Beaulieu turns to video.

"Just try to watch a lot of film," he said. "Every now and then, I'll go back and watch a game I played and usually a lot of positive things that I've done. Watch a lot of tape, and that's basically all you can do."

"The biggest thing for me is mentally try and stay involved. I think that's what goes first. It's not so much my body and my hands, my legs. It's more the mental part of it."

Pilut, a rookie, watches the veterans who are in the lineup when he's not.

"I just try to focus on our game and our system, try to look at guys and learn from guys," he said. "The veterans who help me out a lot in the locker room, I focus on those guys and learn a lot from them, just how they are out there on the ice."

Aside from joining the scratched list, Pilut and Beaulieu have something else in common. They perform better at home than on the road, where the opposition decides the matchups. Here are their stats at home:

Player	Games	Goals	Assists	Corsi	Plus/minus
Beaulieu	16	3	4	52.13	4
Pilut	8	1	4	52.32	5

And their stats on the road:

Player	Games	Goals	Assists	Corsi	Plus/minus
Beaulieu	10	0	0	45.19	-4
Pilut	8	0	0	52	-1

Beaulieu adds a physicality that the 5-foot-11, 180-pound Pilut can't match. Pilut is a better puck mover, though he's had egregious giveaways during recent games.

"Those type of mistakes aren't really my game," Pilut said. "It's been happening a couple times now, and you just want to forget about it. But in one way, you learn from it, and you go on. You don't want to do that again, you know? That's what I'm trying to do now is refocus on my game, keep developing and play my game even better."

If the Sabres wanted to get down to seven defensemen, they had an ideal chance last week. Their bye and the NHL All-Star break coincided with the AHL All-Star Game. Pilut was selected to play in the minor-league showcase, so he could have gone down to Rochester.

He stayed, though he says no one has told him if he's staying for the rest of the season. The long-term uncertainty matches the short-term questions about the lineup spots.

Botterill and his fellow GMs will have the ultimate say in who stays or departs. Defensemen have been in demand. Toronto acquired Jake Muzzin from Los Angeles on Monday, hours after Dallas picked up Jamie Oleksiak from Pittsburgh for a fourth-round pick. There were four other trades involving D-men earlier this month, typically for a mid- to late-round pick.

Odds are good that Buffalo will join the movement before the Feb. 25 trade deadline. Until then, Housley is deciding who's sitting and playing — and two guys have to deal with it.

"It's just where we are," the coach said. "We're carrying eight defensemen, and there's no good way to go about it."

Sabres' Nathan Beaulieu, Matt Hunwick patiently waiting to play

By Bill Hoppe
Olean Times Herald
January 28, 2019

BUFFALO – Doing extra work on and off the ice to stay sharp for your next opportunity is the easy part for healthy scratches.

"It's not so much my body, my hands, my legs," said Sabres defenseman Nathan Beaulieu, who has been scratched 12 out of the last 15 games. "It's more the mental part of it. The game's really fast. You step in the position you're in, a lot is on the line, so it's important that you're ready."

Right now, the Sabres have eight healthy defensemen, meaning coach Phil Housley must sit out two healthy ones every game. Casey Nelson is also practicing again after recovering from an upper-body injury.

For more than a month, Beaulieu and Matt Hunwick have usually been the odd guys out.

"There's 22, 23 other hours in the day where it can creep in your mind you're not playing," said Hunwick, who has played only two games this season after recovering from a neck injury. "You just try to focus on the things that you can control, be a good teammate."

However, Hunwick, 33, might dress for Tuesday's road tilt against the Columbus Blue Jackets, the Sabres' first outing since Jan. 18 following their bye week and the NHL All-Star break.

Hunwick, a healthy scratch the last 13 games, has been practicing beside defenseman Marco Scandella, a sign he has possibly cracked the top six.

Still, Housley wouldn't officially say Hunwick would play his first game since Dec. 18.

"We'll know more tomorrow," Housley said Monday inside KeyBank Center.

Based on Monday's practice pairings, Beaulieu, 26, and rookie Lawrence Pilut, 23, will likely be scratched Tuesday. Before the long break, Pilut, who has passed Beaulieu on the depth chart, struggled in the Sabres' 4-3 road loss to the Vancouver Canucks.

For the third straight contest and eighth time in the last nine outings, Beaulieu could watch his teammates.

A report surfaced two weeks ago the affable Beaulieu, a former first-round pick by the Montreal Canadiens, had requested a trade.

Beaulieu wants to make it clear he loves being a part of the Sabres and the city.

"Buffalo's taken me with open arms," Beaulieu said Monday.

But Beaulieu, a restricted free agent following the season, wants game action.

"Let's face it, we're in a business now," Beaulieu said. "I'm a hockey player and ... I feel like I can play every night. I think I proved that over my time in this league. So (the) bottom line is you just want to be out there and help this team because we set ourselves up. We're in a pretty good position for the second half."

As the Sabres, who have fallen from first overall to fifth in the Atlantic Division, piled up wins early on, it was easier for Housley to pick his defense lineup.

"We've made decisions earlier in the season and we were having a lot more success, and it was easier to change guys when we were winning or losing," Housley said. "But now it's sort of been driven by results. That's what goes into a lot of those decisions. Are we getting the results?"

"We've got eight very good defensemen that can play. So that's tough decisions. It falls on me to make the right one."

Hunwick, who arrived from the Pittsburgh Penguins on June 27, has endured an odd campaign. The neck injury he suffered working out during the offseason sidelined him until Dec. 16.

"I've played two NHL games in probably nine or 10 months," Hunwick said. "I'm sure there will be some rust next time I play just from a lack of playing. Guys are too good at this point to kind of feel like you can just jump in and be at your best.

"But I think that's kind of the goal. That's why you practice so hard, that's why you do all the things away from the rink to give yourself the best opportunity when you go in."

Sitting out hasn't sapped much of Beaulieu's confidence. He knows he contributed regularly to the Sabres early on, contributing some solid minutes.

"(Playing only) 26 games stinks," Beaulieu said of his season. "But I'm happy with where I'm at. Obviously, I just got to try to keep developing. It's tough not playing. I'm a 26-year-old defenseman. I feel like I could skate well, got good skill.

"I just give a lot of credit to my teammates. They've really helped me along (with) this. It hasn't been the easiest road. The bottom line is it's just human nature, you want to be out there."

Sabres' Jack Eichel snags memorabilia; Phil Housley unsure about defense

By Bill Hoppe
Olean Times Herald
January 28, 2019

BUFFALO – Before Sabres captain Jack Eichel left the NHL All-Star Game in San Jose, he snagged some special memorabilia for his house.

In addition to having his game jersey signed by the entire Eastern Conference squad and a stick autographed by everyone in the game, the high-scoring center received an item he has coveted.

"I grabbed one of (Sidney) Crosby's sticks," Eichel said this afternoon inside KeyBank Center. "That was cool. I had been waiting on one of those for a little bit."

Eichel, 21, and winger Jeff Skinner, the Sabres' other participant in Saturday's game, returned to practice today inside HarborCenter.

Incredibly, later in the session, Skinner appeared to lose an edge and slid into Eichel's legs, taking him out.

Both players got up and kept going. Still, it could've been much worse.

Based on the defense combos, Matt Hunwick, a healthy scratch the last 13 games, could return Tuesday in Columbus, the Sabres' first game after their bye week and the NHL All-Star break. Hunwick skated beside Marco Scandella.

Sabres coach Phil Housley, however, wouldn't reveal if Hunwick would dress.

"It's just good to be back together as a group, as a team," Housley said.

Hunwick, 33, last played Dec. 18, his second appearance after a neck injury sidelined him for months.

Nathan Beaulieu and rookie Lawrence Pilut could be the odd defensemen out.

Meanwhile, as the Sabres sat idle during their bye, some of the opponents they're chasing in the standings kept playing and gaining ground.

"It's uncomfortable, right, because you're seeing other teams, particularly Montreal, keep winning," Housley said.

The Sabres trail the Canadiens, who have their bye this week, by seven points but have three games in hand.

"Those games in hand are just what they are, games in hand," Housley said. "You still have to get results."

The Sabres are four points out of the Eastern Conference's last wild card spot.

"It's a good thing for us, a challenge for us," Housley said. This is where we wanted to be. Obviously, we want to be in a playoff spot, but we put ourselves in a good position. ... I'm excited to see how our guys are going to react to that challenge."

With Eichel and Skinner Back Sabres Get Ready to Start Second half

By Stu Boyar

WGRZ

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BUFFALO, N.Y. — Sabres head coach Phil Housley put his team through a brisk practice Monday morning at Harborcenter.

With the second half starting Tuesday night in Columbus, the Sabres are four points out of a playoff spot. After practice Housley said, "Scoring chances no longer count. We need production."

The Sabres are desperately in need of secondary scoring. It's been an issue all season long as the top line of Jack Eichel, Jeff Skinner and Sam Reinhart have carried the load for the Sabres.

Skinner has 30 goals, seven shy of his career high, while Eichel leads the team in points. Both returned to practice after participating in the NHL All Star festivities in San Jose over the weekend.

Skinner said, "It's cool to be there with a bunch of guys you're not normally playing with, you get to enjoy some of the top players in the league, watch them sort of show off their skills." It was Skinner's second All Star appearance, but first since his rookie year with Carolina.

It was also Eichel's second All Star appearance. He went last year too. Eichel took the opportunity to add to his memorabilia collection. "My game jersey, I got that signed by all the guys on the East. I got a stick signed by everyone in the All Star game again and then I grabbed one of Crosby's sticks so that was cool. I had been waiting on one of those for awhile so it was really cool to get one of his. I have an Alex Ovechkin stick too, so its cool I got both those guys."

The Sabres play three games in four nights this week starting with games on the road at Columbus Tuesday and Dallas Wednesday. The Sabres return home Friday night to face Patrick Kane and the Chicago Blackhawks. The Chicago game is the first of a seven game home stand that may go a long way toward determining whether or not the Sabres are a playoff team.

The Sabres are sliding in aftermath of their early season winning streak, but don't count Buffalo out

By Jared Clinton
The Hockey News
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It was two months ago, almost to the day, that the optimism surrounding the Buffalo Sabres' season reached its zenith.

Guided by Jack Eichel and Jeff Skinner and rookie standout Rasmus Dahlin, Buffalo was bounding up the Eastern Conference standings and had just extended their league-best winning streak into double digits. The 10-game run that spanned three weeks in November had taken the Sabres to the very top of the Atlantic Division, one point clear of the Stanley Cup favorite Tampa Bay Lightning, two points ahead of the star-studded Toronto Maple Leafs and six points up on the Boston Bruins. On the surface, the Sabres appeared destined for a playoff berth.

Life in Buffalo since the winning streak, though, has been cruel. The next time out after extending the streak to 10 games, the Sabres tasted defeat for the first time since early November, handed a 5-4 loss by the Lightning. That was followed by a 3-2 loss to the Florida Panthers, a 2-1 loss to the Nashville Predators and a 4-3 defeat at the hands of the Toronto Maple Leafs. As quickly as the Sabres had risen to the top of the Atlantic, they had come back to the pack. Not since that 10-game winning streak has Buffalo truly been able to get back on a roll.

In fact, in the 23 games since posting the double-digit win streak, the Sabres have managed just seven victories, and Buffalo's 7-12-4 record ties them for the fewest points in the league over that stretch with the third-worst points percentage, a mere .391 percent. The Sabres' closest company has no longer been the cream of the proverbial crop atop the Atlantic. Instead, Buffalo shares a spot in the standings over the past two months with the Anaheim Ducks, Chicago Blackhawks, New Jersey Devils, Detroit Red Wings, Ottawa Senators and Colorado Avalanche. With the post-all-star break schedule about to kick off, one can't help but wonder where that leaves the Sabres' once promising playoff hopes.

As they wake up Monday, surely well-rested as all but all-stars Eichel and Skinner have spent the past nine days off and are entering their 10th consecutive evening without game action, Buffalo does so four points out of the final wild-card spot in the Eastern Conference, tied with the Carolina Hurricanes and staring up at the Pittsburgh Penguins. What once appeared to be a campaign that was sure to snap their seven-season playoff drought no longer seems like a sure thing. And the issues are twofold, it would appear.

Through the early part of the campaign, Buffalo's goaltending had been impressive, and it wasn't a case of one netminder really outshining the other. Off-season signing Carter Hutton, who inked a three-year, \$8.25-million deal after posting career-best numbers last season, was proving himself to be no flash in the pan. The first-time No. 1 netminder had posted a .920 save percentage in 19 appearances through to the end of the winning streak. Not to be outdone, backup Linus Ullmark was making the most of his spot starts, posting a .926 SP in seven appearances with only one blemish, an overtime defeat, on his record.

But since that 10-game winning streak was snapped, neither netminder has played nearly as well. Hutton, for instance, has seen his numbers drop precipitously, managing a mere .898 SP over his past dozen trips into the blue paint, which has resulted in a disastrous 2-8-2 record over that time and a few instances in which coach Phil Housley has passed on the perceived go-to goaltender in consecutive outings. As for Ullmark, who has taken those consecutive starts in Hutton's place, the performances haven't been all that much better. Though he sports a considerably better 5-4-2 record in 12 games, his .907 SP is still far worse than his early-season performance. The result is a Sabres crease that has gone from a .930 SP at 5-on-5 and .916 at all strengths across the first 25 games to .916 SP at 5-on-5 and .901 SP at all strengths over the past 23 games, according to NaturalStatTrick.

Not helping mask the goaltending issues over the past two months is that the offensive performance has taken a slight downturn since the end of the 10-game streak. While at five-a-side the per-60-minute production has remained relatively similar — a positive difference of two-tenths of a goal since Nov. 29 — their all-strengths production has dipped by more than one-third of a goal per 60 minutes and resulted in a decrease in goals for percentage of nearly eight percent. The decline in goal production, though, is the result on one of the issues the

Sabres may need to address if they dream of snapping their playoff drought this season: middle-six scoring depth.

It's without question that the addition of Skinner, who has cooled slightly but remains on pace for a career-best 51 goals, has paid massive dividends for the Sabres, and Eichel has had a natural progression from high-profile rookie to steady-scoring star center. But with the exception of Sam Reinhart, who has notched eight goals and 27 points across the 23 games since the November winning streak ended, the offensive depth has been sorely lacking. To wit, the fourth- and fifth-highest scorers after the trio of Reinhart, Eichel and Skinner across the past 23 games are defensemen Rasmus Ristolainen and rookie blueliner Rasmus Dahlin, who have 16 and 12 points, respectively. After that, the next-best scorer has been Evan Rodrigues. He has four goals and eight points over that span. That's simply not enough production from the middle of the lineup to win consistently.

So, how does Buffalo right this ship and potentially chase a playoff berth that can be the first stepping stone for a Sabres club that needs to start moving in the right direction? Though it would be misguided to fall into the buyer category with the deadline approaching — selling important future assets for a quick rental fix — it would almost certainly be worthwhile to take the kind of long-term view that the wild-card rival Hurricanes did when they flipped Victor Rask to the Minnesota Wild to acquire Nino Niederreiter. Adding a non-rental player for a middle-six talent, and one who might be a better fit in the system and find some production if he gets a change of scenery, could be a boon to the offense and in turn provide Buffalo the scoring depth it sorely needs.

As for the goaltending, chances are it can come around and be steady enough to keep the Sabres in the hunt. The minor improvements Buffalo has seen in a number of underlying categories — the Sabres' Corsi, shots, scoring chances and high-danger chances percentages have seen upticks across the past 23 games — could help Hutton settle back in while Ullmark continues to push for a heavier workload.

Do the Sabres make the post-season? It's no guarantee. But the real Buffalo lies somewhere between the 10-game winning streak and the league bottom feeder that has struggled ever since, and if they can find that middle before it's too late, the Sabres may very well be able to sneak in and snap their seven-year drought.

'This is the fun part': Sabres embracing road ahead

By Jourdon LaBarber

Sabres.com

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Pushing for the playoffs became a habit for Marco Scandella during his tenure with the Minnesota Wild, where the defenseman was a member of five straight postseason teams from 2012-13 through 2016-17.

While members of the Sabres packed their bags for Columbus following practice on Monday, Scandella smiled ear-to-ear when asked to describe the task ahead.

"This is why you play hockey," he said. "This is the fun part. Last year, coming off the break, we knew we were in a position that was almost impossible to make the playoffs. It wasn't that fun coming back. Other teams are pushing too and when you don't have much to play for, it isn't easy.

"... It's exciting to be in this position as opposed to last year. I think everyone's all smiles in this room right now, ready to work hard for each other."

While veterans like Scandella, Kyle Okposo and Conor Sheary are no strangers to the trials of a playoff push, younger members of the Sabres' core have been learning on the fly. As the games get tighter, individual plays become magnified for their importance.

The Sabres saw that firsthand in pre-break losses to Carolina, Tampa Bay and Vancouver, games in which crucial mistakes spoiled otherwise solid efforts.

"Everything's going to tighten up from now until the end of the year," Scandella said. "I feel like we understand that in this room. We have a lot of guys that are young and don't have that experience but are ready to battle. We have 34 games left. You're going to have to scratch and claw for every inch.

"We're in a position where we're going to have to make a real push here to have a chance to make the playoffs. It's going to take everybody in this room. We have to start playing playoff hockey from now on and treat every play like it could be your last, because every play makes a difference. Every play counts."

With 54 points, the Sabres sit four back from Pittsburgh for the second Wild Card spot in the Eastern Conference. They were sidelined for their bye week while Montreal picked up a pair of wins to move to third in the Atlantic Division with 61 points, though the Sabres have three games in hand.

With the Canadiens now on their bye week, the Sabres have a chance to make up ground.

"Those games in hand are just what they are, games in hand," coach Phil Housley said. "You still have to get results. I think it's a good thing for us, a challenge for us. This is where we wanted to be. Obviously, we want to be in a playoff spot, but we put ourselves in a good position.

"What we do moving forward here [is important], particularly a lot of guys who haven't experienced this situation, because it is hard. It's going to be difficult. But I'm excited to see how our guys are going to react to that challenge.

The schedule continues with back-to-back road games in Columbus and Dallas, followed by a seven-game homestand that begins against Chicago on Friday. Their next opponent, the Blue Jackets, sit just five points ahead in the standings.

Sabres captain Jack Eichel stressed the importance of taking a game-by-game approach while recapturing the attention to detail that helped define their early-season success.

"I just think desperation in our own end and keeping the puck out of our own end," he said. "I think it's important. I think at the beginning of the year, especially when we were winning, there were shifts maybe where we didn't get too much offensively, but we weren't giving up as much.

I think it's important for us to get back to that, where we're hard to play against in our own zone and hard to play against when we have the puck. I think the better we do that, the more success we have as a group."

It will be a tall task, no doubt, but it's one Scandella said the team is embracing.

"We have a lot to play for here, a lot of pride in this room for the city of Buffalo," he said. "I'm just excited to get going."

Adding to his collection

Eichel and Jeff Skinner were back on the ice Monday after both were excused from Sunday's practice due to their involvement at All-Star Weekend. It turns out the Sabres captain came back with a sought-after piece of memorabilia to add to his collection.

"I got some cool things," he said. "I got my game jersey that I wore during the game, I got that signed by all the guys on the East. I got a stick signed by everyone in the All-Star Game again and I grabbed one of Crosby's sticks, so that was pretty cool.

"I've been waiting on one of those for a little bit, so it was really cool to get one of his. I have an Alex Ovechkin stick too, so it's cool I've got both those guys."

Monday's practice

The lineup remained the same from Sunday, albeit with Eichel and Skinner reclaiming their spots on the top line alongside Sam Reinhart. With eight healthy defensemen on the ice - and a ninth who's nearing a return in Casey Nelson - Housley said decisions regarding who will play in Columbus will be made Tuesday.

"We've got eight very good defensemen that can play," Housley said. "So that's tough decisions. It falls on me to make the right one."

Here's how the team lined up in full:

53 Jeff Skinner - 9 Jack Eichel - 23 Sam Reinhart
43 Conor Sheary - 37 Casey Mittelstadt - 71 Evan Rodrigues
72 Tage Thompson - 17 Vladimir Sobotka - 29 Jason Pominville
28 Zemgus Girgensons - 22 Johan Larsson - 21 Kyle Okposo
81 Remi Elie

19 Jake McCabe - 55 Rasmus Ristolainen
26 Rasmus Dahlin - 4 Zach Bogosian
6 Marco Scandella - 48 Matt Hunwick
82 Nathan Beaulieu - 24 Lawrence Pilut
8 Casey Nelson

40 Carter Hutton
35 Linus Ullmark