



Buffalo Sabres

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Mike Harrington: Home is where the Sabres' playoffs hopes will rekindle or fade away

By Mike Harrington
The Buffalo News
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Maybe what lies ahead for the Buffalo Sabres makes or breaks their path to the playoffs. But there's no guarantee a seven-game homestand will do that on its own, especially if it gets split roughly down the middle. What it is likely to do with more certainty is spin General Manager Jason Botterill's strategy for the trade deadline.

The setting is this: The Sabres host Patrick Kane and the Chicago Blackhawks Friday night at 7 in KeyBank Center. It will be their first home game since Jan. 12 and will open a seven-game run downtown that lasts through Feb. 15 and equals the longest one in franchise history.

The only other time the Sabres have played seven in a row at home was from Feb. 20-March 2, 1997, in the building's first season. Buffalo went 4-2-1 in that stretch en route to a season that ended with a loss to Philadelphia in the second round of the playoffs.

The Sabres entered Thursday's play three points behind Columbus for the East's last wild-card slot, pending the Blue Jackets' game in Antarctica, er, Winnipeg. (An aside here: If you're feeling overwhelmed by our cold weather, it was minus 35 Fahrenheit in The Peg on Wednesday).

The Sabres went just 2-3 in their five road games since we last saw them in the 716 but their play has been trending upward since that horrific 7-2 loss at Edmonton on Jan. 14.

In those five games, they're going at a 55 percent Corsi rate both overall and at 5 on 5, and have averaged 34 shots on goal per game. But they've only posted a shooting percentage of 8.2 percent, their power play remains miserable and their passing and decisions in the defensive zone continue to prompt rub-your-eyes levels of disbelief.

The Sabres showed resilience in the overtime win in Calgary and had good legs coming off the break in Tuesday's win in Columbus. One-goal losses in Vancouver and Dallas were disappointing in that they had the better of the offensive zone play, especially in third periods, but were stymied by giveaways from their defense that directly led to goals.

Slow start, no goal set stage for Sabres' shutout loss in Dallas

The Sabres took Thursday off to make the trek home from Dallas in the wake of this week's blizzard. They left for Columbus Monday, just in time to miss all the bad weather, and have to hope their timing at home is again going to be fortuitous.

The Sabres are 14-6-3 at KeyBank and the only team in the East with fewer regulation home losses is Tampa Bay at 20-5-0. The upcoming schedule is not daunting either.

The homestand lists Chicago, followed by Minnesota, Carolina, Detroit, Winnipeg, the New York Islanders and New York Rangers. Minnesota, Winnipeg and the Islanders are currently in playoff spots while the other four teams are not. Carolina, however, has beaten the Sabres seven straight times, a streak that's long overdue to end and is the longest for the Hurricanes' franchise since the Hartford Whalers bounced Buffalo seven straight times in 1986.

There are 14 points available in the seven games and a good number for the Sabres to get would be 10. It may be asking a lot, however, of a club that's just 8-13-4 in its last 25 games after going 17-6-2 in the first 25. And one that hasn't won even two games in a row since Dec. 11-13. But that's where the Sabres are at right now.

The objectives here are pretty simple: Pile up points at home, stay in the playoff race and maybe get a little help from the GM.

Home, Sweet Home The longest homestands in Buffalo Sabres history

Seven games

| Dates | W-L-OT/T |
|------------------------|----------|
| Jan. 20 - Feb. 2, 1997 | 4-2-1 |

Six games

| Dates | W-L-OT/T |
|-----------------------------|----------|
| Dec. 23, 1986-Jan. 4, 1987 | 3-2-1 |
| March 20-April 1, 1994 | 4-1-1 |
| Feb. 9-23, 1997 | 4-0-2 |
| Feb. 11-21, 1999 | 3-0-3 |
| Dec. 30, 2005-Jan. 14, 2006 | 3-2-1 |
| Feb. 7-22, 2007 | 5-0-1 |
| Feb. 16-26, 2011 | 2-3-1 |
| March 10-23, 2018 | 1-4-1 |

Source: Buffalo News research

Last year, of course, the season was long gone by the deadline and Botterill's only task was to get rid of Evander Kane after he decided the winger didn't fit his long-term plan. The deal was consummated minutes before the stroke of 3 p.m. on Deadline Day, and the haul was unimpressive at the time but became acceptable when Kane re-signed with the Sharks and thus brought back a first-round pick for Buffalo this June.

This is an entirely different deadline for Botterill. He needs to be adding to his team, both for now and the future. And it would be nice if he didn't wait until Feb. 25 to do it.

The Sabres need help up front and could likely use another serviceable veteran defenseman. The only unrestricted free agents who could become rentals elsewhere are Jeff Skinner and Jason Pominville. A trade of Skinner would be a white flag to negotiations on a long-term deal and largely to the season, a colossal failure that would land so squarely at Botterill's feet that it doesn't seem plausible that could happen.

Mike Harrington: \$\$\$\$skinner has leverage, so he's not fretting about pace of contract talks

A trade of Pominville with shared salary could get the Sabres some room on their books and the lineup for this year by opening a spot for a Rochester forward like C.J. Smith, Victor Olofsson or Alex Nylander. That seems like more of a possibility.

For now, I'll even succumb to the old one-game-at-a-time theory. The pride of South Buffalo remains a superstar, but Kane's Blackhawks are among the dregs of the NHL this year, with Father Time damaging the defense and GM Stan Bowman's post-2015 Cup moves causing even more trouble all over the roster.

The Sabres broke a 12-game losing streak to Chicago that dated to 2009 with a 5-3 win here last March and they have to make sure to get two points again. That would be a good starting point.

Buffalo is in this race with Columbus, Boston, Montreal, Toronto, Pittsburgh, the Islanders and Washington. Only Tampa Bay is out of reach. There's no reason the Sabres shouldn't stay in it for the duration, have Botterill augment the roster -- whether from within or outside -- and thus give us meaningful March hockey for the first time since 2012.

Get things going in the right direction Friday night and the Sabres can bring the fans back into games like they were in November during their 10-game winning streak. The Blackhawks' veterans certainly know how impactful a home crowd can be. Winnipeg rates as one of the wackier places in the league as well.

That's what Buffalo can be again. This has been a rough two months but the Sabres have a big chance to spark a turnaround. The schedule maker has given them a huge assist. If they don't take advantage, they'll have no one but themselves to blame.

Sabres Notebook: Zach Bogosian holding Casino for a Cause

By Lance Lysowski

The Buffalo News

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DALLAS -- A number of Buffalo Sabres players will be dealing cards and working the gaming tables when the Town Ballroom downtown is transformed to resemble a prohibition-era casino Saturday night.

All involved will be lending their time to Sabres defenseman Zach Bogosian's "Casino for a Cause II," an event held by his foundation, the BOGO Bunch, to raise funds for Roswell Park Comprehensive Cancer Center. The event begins at 7 p.m.

Attendees, all of whom must be 21 years or older, will not be playing for actual money; however, they will enjoy live music, an open bar, cuisine from local restaurants and an auction. For Bogosian and his wife, Bianca, this labor of love began in 2015, when they began working to honor his late grandmother, Armen, who battled lymphoma.

"I always said at a certain point in my life, when I'm comfortable where I want to start giving back and I'm invested in the community, I wanted to start something," Bogosian said. "It was kind of a no-brainer as far as trying to help people. Getting things up and going was obviously the tricky part."

This will be the Bogosians' third event since beginning the nonprofit charity, and like most causes such as this, planning becomes easier with time, he said. Friends, family members, teammates and local businesses have been lending helping hands.

The BOGO Bunch's mission is to create a family atmosphere for those affected by cancer. Bogosian, 28, is playing his fifth season with the Sabres, who acquired him from Winnipeg in February 2015.

He has since become a revered leader inside the Sabres' dressing room and is serving as an alternate captain. Bianca is a retired professional soccer player who played her final season with the Boston Breakers of the National Women's Soccer League in 2014.

Last March, they held the Bogosian Kancer Jam in KeyBank Center, where 64 fundraising teams played KanJam with Sabres players -- all proceeds benefited Roswell Park. This will be Bogosian's second casino event.

There will be silent and live auctions with live music by the Rat Pack Band, as well as complimentary food, beverages and valet parking. Tickets can be purchased for \$125 at www.townballroom.com, and donations can also be made to the BOGO Bunch through its website www.bogobunchfoundation.org.

"It's amazing," he said. "First and foremost, the events don't happen without my teammates volunteering their time. They've been a huge part of it. I know my name is on the foundation, but they're what makes it so big. It's definitely been fun. Obviously throughout the last few years there have been so many people in Buffalo who have volunteered to help out. People come to the event, show support. It's been fun."

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Elliotte Friedman of TSN said on his podcast, "31 Thoughts," Wednesday that Sabres winger Jason Pominville could be available via trade.

Pominville, 36, was a healthy scratch Wednesday night in a 1-0 loss to the Dallas Stars in American Airlines Center. He has two goals with a minus-5 rating over his last 30 games after scoring nine goals in his first 20 games this season.

A second-round draft pick in 2001, Pominville played his 1,000th career NHL game in November and recorded his 700th career point in October. He is an unrestricted free agent this offseason and is still owed more than \$1.9 million for the remainder of this season, according to CapFriendly.com.

As part of a modified no trade clause, Pominville has a list of 10 teams in which he cannot be traded to. He is averaging a career-low 12 minutes, 27 seconds per game this season.

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Defenseman Jacob Bryson, an unsigned fourth-round draft pick of the Sabres in 2017, scored his fourth goal of the season for Providence College in a 4-1 win over Northeastern last Friday. Bryson, 21, has 20 points with a plus-16 rating in 26 games and is an alternate captain for a second consecutive season.

Up-and-down play still torments Sabres, who hope to right ship with 7 games at home

By Joe Yerdon

The Athletic

January 31, 2019

DALLAS — The end of a long road trip, albeit one broken up by the bye week and the All-Star break, will send the Buffalo Sabres home for seven straight games. What we found out from these latest two games in Columbus and Dallas is that they are who they've been all season long and that's perfectly average.

They had two one-goal games. They were offensive dynamos against Columbus in a 5-4 win, but were shutout for the second time on the season the following night, 1-0 by Dallas. Up and down, win one, lose one. It's balance, but not the type a team looking to get to the playoffs wants to have.

While the Sabres blew leads against Columbus, including a 4-2 lead late in the second period when they allowed two goals in the final three-plus minutes, Conor Sheary's goal in the third pushed the Sabres ahead for good. Buffalo got stirring performances from their top two lines, especially Sheary-Casey Mittelstadt-Evan Rodrigues (who scored in his fourth straight game). It's basically automatic that the Jeff Skinner-Jack Eichel-Sam Reinhart line will be good at this point.

Against Dallas though, head coach Phil Housley shuffled his lineup to put Nathan Beaulieu in and take Matt Hunwick, who hadn't played since Dec. 18 before playing in Columbus, out as well as replace Jason Pominville with Remi Elie. Beaulieu hadn't played since Jan. 14 in Edmonton and Elie hadn't played since Jan. 5 in Boston.

Before the Dallas game, Housley said the extended time off played a big factor in why guys who haven't played in some time got games right out of the break.

"I think it's really important, but we don't want them sitting out too long where they get a little stale; reward 'em," Housley said. "These guys have done a terrific job and are very good teammates and understand the situation they're in. The guys that are playing respect that and we've got to continue to develop in that area where we're trying to focus on key things to get them better so when they do get back in the lineup they'll make the most of their opportunity."

For Elie it was a game against the team that waived him earlier this season and Housley always likes to give guys a game against their former teams. Curiously enough, it was a guy on the Stars who was able to help cast the lone dagger in the Sabres' 1-0 loss.

After a start where the Stars hit everyone in a Sabres sweater and had three great scoring chances, one found its way past Linus Ullmark when former Sabre Taylor Fedun intercepted a Zach Bogosian pass and fed Jamie Benn for the game's lone goal. Ben Bishop continued his career-long dominance of the Sabres (11-0-1 with 11 straight wins).

Marco Scandella thought he tied the game in the third period, but officials waved it off, saying Nathan Beaulieu interfered with Ben Bishop. Housley challenged, but the call held up after officials reviewed the play.

It was a toss-up play and an unfortunate break for the Sabres, who stepped up the pressure in the third period. After being outshot 11-6 and 20-11 in shot attempts in the second, they turned it on the Stars, 11-7, in the third, including a 25-12 shot-attempt advantage.

That kind of up-and-down play is an example of a team that continues to learn how to play complete games as well as how to finish games where they have a lead. As has been pointed out all season long, they've got a lot of young guys being asked to do a lot and they're, perhaps, ahead of schedule in chasing down a playoff spot. This learning curve got accelerated quickly and now the games are playing tighter and more akin to what they would see should they make the postseason.

"I thought Columbus was a similar game," Housley said. "I know it was a similar game with two teams coming back off the break, but this is the way it's going to be going down the stretch. Teams that are going to be in the

playoffs, fighting to get in the playoffs, trying to improve their position, so it was a great game in that respect for our guys to take back to Buffalo, but I think it's a good learning experience for all of our guys to learn what it's going to be like going down the stretch."

The Stars gave the Sabres fits early on with their physical play and their speed. Yes, it was their first game after their break and they were very well rested, but it was a taste of what's to come from teams fighting for the playoffs the rest of the way.

"I think we knew they were going to be ready to play," Eichel said. "They're a desperate team, you see where they are in the standings, they need the points just as bad as we do. It's a tight-checking game and I thought we got our legs under us as the game went on, we started to just make simple plays and it worked for us, but there's no moral victories this point of the season. It's either you get two points or you don't at this point and we didn't get two points tonight and it's back to the drawing board and a long homestretch that we've got to take advantage of."

Fedun fitting in with Dallas

In speaking with Taylor Fedun, who was traded for a 2020 conditional seventh-round pick on Nov. 10 — a condition that's already been met by him playing enough games with the Stars, following practice on Tuesday in Frisco, Texas, he said he understood in training camp with the Sabres that his time with the organization likely wasn't long.

"For me, the biggest thing was I think I only played two preseason games and I didn't really get a look on the power play or anything like that and that's something where I chipped in there in the past and that opportunity kind of closed," Fedun said. "Then it got to a point where I wasn't playing every game in Rochester, it certainly seemed like that was a possibility something like that (being traded) could happen."

He didn't request a trade, it just occurred naturally, but now with the Stars he has seven points (two goals, five assists) in 27 games. Although his acquisition wasn't exactly intended to give Dallas a boost, thanks to injuries to Stephen Johns and Marc Methot, he's been able to get a shot to succeed with the Stars and coach Jim Montgomery.

Still, he liked the direction the Sabres are headed in, but the trade, his first as a professional, made for a resolution for what had been a particularly tough time. Being scratched in Rochester because of the glut of defensemen they had at the time (nine active when he was traded) had him looking at the possibility he might've been stuck.

"It was extremely tough. As much you try and stay positive the entire time, I think I really did try to, but you can't help but think, 'Do I need to start dusting off my resume,'" Fedun said. "If I was in that position where I wasn't playing, it's a tough lifestyle to be asking your family to do. It certainly floated across my mind, it's crazy how much a few months changes your perspective on things because it's pretty far from my mind right now."

Alumni Spotlight: Bill Hajt

By Brian Duff

Sabres.com

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Bill Hajt's first full season with the Sabres was 1974-75. The club went to the Stanley Cup Final that year, losing in six games to the Philadelphia Flyers. With Hajt as a fixture on the blue line, the Sabres made the playoffs in 11 straight seasons (through 1984-85), establishing a club record that still stands today.

Hajt was inducted into the Buffalo Sabres Hall of Fame in 2000.

What are you most proud of from your career with the Buffalo Sabres?

That's kind of a tough question. I would say probably playing on a team that was successful for a long period of time. We never won the Cup but we were always one of the favorites, one of the top teams. We had a bunch of young kids that kind of grew up together and with a lot of talent.

So it was just a lot of fun. It just made you proud of consistent we were, how good we were at a very young age and we stayed that way for at least ten years of my career.

Hajt played 854 NHL games, all in Buffalo blue and gold. He remains fifth on the team's all-time games played list.

Do you have a favorite memory?

Well, there's lots. Probably the two Russian games that we played and dominated. That was big. It was like World War III, I remember that. And of course, going to the Finals. That was a bit of a downer in the end, but we were so young and so talented, it was a fun time.

In 1975-76 the first Super Series pitted two teams from Moscow, Russia (formerly the Soviet Union) playing eight exhibition games against NHL teams. On January 4, 1976 the Sabres crushed the Soviet Wings 12-6 at the Memorial Auditorium. It was the Wings' only loss in their four games.

In 1979-80, the Super Series again brought two Moscow-based teams to North America, this time for a nine-game exhibition series. On January 3, 1980, the Sabres again cruised to a lopsided 6-1 win over the Soviet Red Army.

Why did you choose to remain here in Buffalo when it was all said and done?

Actually, it was a pretty easy decision. I played my whole career here, and I've got four kids and they grew up here. I was able to find another good job here locally and I still work at it. Just everything - the pieces all fit into place and we love it here.

It's a small-town atmosphere, everybody's friendly. The kids love it here, schools were good, it's a safe place to live. All the positive things, it's close to Canada where we can get some of our Canadian news from our families and stuff like that. It was an easy decision. I love Buffalo.

Hajt was drafted 33rd overall by the Sabres in the 1971 NHL Entry Draft. Twenty-five years later, his son Chris (also a defenseman) was drafted 32nd overall by the Edmonton Oilers.

Chris appeared in six NHL games with Edmonton (1) and Washington (5), and nearly 600 games in six pro leagues around the world.

Chris and Bill Hajt at the 2017 Buffalo Sabres Alumni Golf Tournament at Park Country Club. // Photo by Bill Wippert. August 21, 2017.

Chris and Bill Hajt at the 2017 Buffalo Sabres Alumni Golf Tournament at Park Country Club. // Photo by Bill Wippert. August 21, 2017. Bill Wippert

How did your career and your experiences help shape your son Chris' game?

Certainly he saw a lot of what went on in my career. He was pretty young, but he certainly got a good taste of it. And growing up, I schooled him a lot. He loved the game. He was a student of the game even at a very young age, he was a good player.

He had good coaching along the way, not necessarily me. I didn't coach him behind the bench, I coached him when I could when we were off the ice. But he just seemed to have the skill, he had the talent, he had the want to be a good player and a student of the game and because of it, he was able to play some years pro. He didn't quite make it to the NHL for any length of time, but he certainly knew the game and played smart and I think it reflects in his coaching.

Chris joined the Guelph Storm (OHL) as an assistant coach in 2008 and spent six years in that organization. After three seasons with the Los Angeles Kings' AHL affiliate, he joined the Sabres in 2017-18 under head coach Phil Housley.

What's Chris' best asset in his current role as an assistant coach with the Buffalo Sabres?

I think it's important - every coach or coaches that I had - that you express to your players a sense of honesty, a sense of integrity. You give them integrity, you expect it back. There's a trust level that what you're telling these players, they've got to understand that this is the way it needs to be done and this is going to help you win the games and we're all in it together as they are.

And I think watching Chris coach all the way through his career here the last few years, he is a man of tremendous integrity and he treats the players fairly and treats them like men. They're all pulling on the rope together. I think he has their trust and it means a lot.

What impresses you most about the way the NHL game is played today?

The speed for sure. We had some fast players, but nowadays they're all fast. The game has changed in that some of the physicality is gone. They're calling the game - the penalties that need to be called. In the old days you could get away with a lot more. But nowadays they're calling more.

The European influence has made a difference. It's more wide open, it's faster and more about skill. You know, I'd still like to see the tough, physical games. Some of our best games I remember playing were against Montreal. Both very talented teams, fast and hit hard. Like it was hard, physical games. I love those type of games.

Despite embracing the physical elements of the game, Hajt's discipline allowed him to amass just 433 penalty minutes in his 854 NHL games. His greatest statistical notes may well be his first two NHL seasons when he posted plus/minus ratings of plus-46 and plus-41. His career rating of plus-320 is second only to Craig Ramsay's plus-324 in franchise history.

What's one thing you would change about today's game if you could?

Whoa, there's a few! I'm still old school. I like the center line being forceable. It's not. Maybe it makes the game more wide open, but you get a lot more icings and stuff like that. A lot more stoppages in play because the forechecking is gone out of the game. So you don't get the pressure that you would like to see.

Other than that, I think the referees, I'd like to see them call the penalties the way they are in the rule book. That isn't necessarily happening right now. But again, they're trying to speed up the game, trying to give the fans the excitement, the goals, and the goals are up which is good because we need fans in the stands and the popularity of the game to grow. We all want that.