



Buffalo Sabres

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Travis Yost's Sabre Metrics: How Rasmus Dahlin has impacted team and vice versa

By Josh Barnett
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Playoffs or not, I think everyone in and around Buffalo recognized how critical the 2018-19 season would be from a player development standpoint.

And at least in terms of order of importance, nothing was more critical than ensuring that the Sabres' 18-year-old rookie defenseman had a smooth start to his NHL career.

It is quite rare to see an 18-year-old get the type of minutes Rasmus Dahlin has received this year.

Even though hockey has increasingly evolved into a young man's game, teams are still generally protective of young puck-movers.

Since the 2007-08 season, only 29 other teenage defenders of similar age and disposition receive similarly high volume usage. Some of those players were a year older, and some of those players were utilized much less. At any rate, it's not uncharted territory for Dahlin, but he's certainly something of an exception to the standard NHL developmental curve:

It's one thing for Dahlin to have the confidence of the coaching staff to deploy him this aggressively. The mere fact that the most common deployment comparables for Dahlin are players such as Victor Hedman and Erik Karlsson should tell you everything you need to know about how the brain trust in Buffalo views Dahlin's current talent and future potential.

But ice time is just one measure. Dahlin might have the confidence of the coaching staff, but that confidence can wane when the play doesn't meet the pedigree. Case in point: Players such as Michael Del Zotto (20th overall, 2008) and Dmitry Kulikov (14th overall, 2009) were similarly utilized during their rookie years, but watched their ice time erode as their play slipped.

I don't think that will be an issue with Dahlin. One of the points we have been beating all season is that the Sabres are a top-heavy team of the highest order. Performance from their core players is the reason why they are firmly in a playoff race, but performance across the rest of their roster (and ultimately, the majority of their players) is why they are going to be fighting until the finish despite a 10-game winning streak that should have all but solidified their playoff berth. The roster is understandably flawed and thin during this transition year. Right now, the team is just trying to patchwork things in the stretch run.

One way that Buffalo has been able to combat top-heaviness has a lot to do with how Dahlin is deployed. One of the hallmarks of a great NHL defenseman is that he can play in any situation with any range of teammates and drive performance. Historically speaking, most high-end defenders – not dissimilar to high-end wingers or high-end centers – can spike the production of their teammates when they are on the ice. With Dahlin, that means not only being able to manage the most important minutes (facing tough competition with Jeff Skinner, Jack Eichel, and company), but also the peripheral minutes (playing with weaker talent against relatively weaker competition).

If we look at Dahlin's "With Or Without You" numbers, we can measure performance by three separate strokes. First, we can see how Dahlin and a given player drive performance together. Then, we can look at how Dahlin plays away from a given player. And lastly, we can see how a player performs away from Dahlin. If we believe that Dahlin is the caliber defender we all think he is, we should be able to see consistent performance spikes whenever Dahlin sees a new teammate.

So far, that looks to be the case. Let's look at it from two measures – Corsi percent (how well Dahlin and teammates drive play territorially), and Goal percent (how well Dahlin and teammates turn that offensive zone pressure into a goal advantage).

First, the Corsi percent measure:

Directionally, the trend is obvious. Both forwards and applicable defensive pairmates see reasonably strong performance from a Corsi percent perspective when playing with Dahlin. This makes sense – Buffalo has received 51.5 percent of the shots in its favor with Dahlin on the ice, and that's been true across most of Buffalo's lineup.

The only outliers tend to be guys who play in emphatic checking line roles (such as Vladimir Sobokta and, to some extent, Tage Thompson), or guys who just generally have poor performance numbers in the first place (such as Rasmus Ristolainen).

The key piece is that middle section – how Dahlin performs away from a given player. You can see that Dahlin isn't reliant on any particular player or group of players to drive his performance. He's nearly getting 50 percent of the shots when not playing with the likes of Jeff Skinner and Jack Eichel, which seems almost impossible when you consider how top heavy this team has been.

The other side of the coin is also illuminating. Players see huge draw-downs in performance when they move away from Dahlin. In fact, the only regular teammate who has seen better results away from Dahlin has been forward Conor Sheary. Otherwise, it's virtually all negative or flat. That's a huge endorsement of Dahlin's play; less so of the rest of the roster.

But the question you might ask – shots are great, but how does it drive goals? And does the trend change when we go to a goal-based analysis?

The trend is directionally the same but more dire in nature. Buffalo doesn't have a goal problem when Dahlin is on the ice, and that's regardless of who he is playing with. All the challenges within Buffalo's lineup tend to come with Dahlin off the ice.

To that end, you are left with two questions: How does Buffalo go about building up the rest of the roster, and how much has the rest of the roster actually suppressed Dahlin's impact in his rookie season? We have talked at length about the first question. The second one, not so much. But it's an important consideration for both Jason Botterill and Phil Housley going forward.

Frustrated by Sabres' recent failures, Housley blows up all 4 lines

By Jason Wolf
The Buffalo News
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Phil Housley blew it all up.

The Buffalo Sabres' coach made major changes to all four lines, top three defensive pairings and both power play units at practice Monday, as the Sabres look to keep their season from running off the rails, remain in the playoff hunt and avoid their first three-game home losing streak when they host the Minnesota Wild on Tuesday at KeyBank Center.

The Sabres are 3-7 in their last 10 games and are in the midst of a critical seven-game homestand, which began with a 7-3 loss to Chicago on Friday. They're nevertheless only three points behind Columbus for the final playoff spot with 31 games remaining in the regular season.

"We tried different combinations within the last 10 games, 15 games, trying to find a balance, maybe a spark, some continuity within the lines," Housley said. "Those are all subject to change as we move forward here. And we addressed the situation on Saturday after our game. We pushed forward. We're trying to find some chemistry, some balance, a spark within those groups, and we're going to talk more about it (Monday)."

The once supremely effective top line of Jack Eichel, Jeff Skinner and Sam Reinhart was disbanded, with Eichel centering a new top line featuring Conor Sheary and Kyle Okposo.

Casey Mittelstadt centered a second line alongside Skinner and Jason Pominville.

Evan Rodrigues centered the third line, alongside Reinhart and C.J. Smith, who was called up from Rochester earlier in the day.

Vladimir Sobotka centered the fourth line, alongside Zemgus Girgensons and Tage Thompson. Johan Larsson was the extra skater and remains day-to-day with an upper body injury.

"Jack's a great player, but a lot goes into playing on a team," Skinner said about moving to the second line and being separated from his fellow All-Star teammate. "If we're going to have success, we're going to have to have success as a unit, everyone, all four lines, all six D, both goalies, and for me, I just want to try and be a piece of the puzzle and sort of contribute in a way that helps the team win. I'll just keep plugging away."

The top three defensive pairings were also remade, with Rasmus Dahlin and Rasmus Ristolainen serving as the top duo, followed by Lawrence Pilut and Zach Bogosian; Marco Scandella and Jake McCabe; and Nathan Beaulieu and Matt Hunwick.

The top power play unit featured Eichel and Dahlin at the points with Skinner, Mittelstadt and Reinhart up front.

The second power play unit was Ristolainen, Rodrigues, Sheary, Okposo and Thompson.

"I think every team, no matter how good their players are, the power play hits a wall at some point," Mittelstadt said. "I think that's just how it goes, and it's more about how you get out of it or how quick you get out of it, rather than actually having the lull, so I think just go out and simplify it and make the plays that are in front of us and shoot the puck, and we should be fine."

The Sabres' power play snapped an 0-for-16 slump over the previous six games by going 1 for 3 against Chicago.

The power play is just 3 for 33 over the last 13 games, and its 17 percent success rate ranks 22nd in the NHL this season.

"You start searching for answers," Okposo said, "and I think stuff like this, when you change lines like that, it can't distract us from the way that we need to play. It all comes back to that. Different lines are going to be

different lines, but we have to play better without the puck and we have to defend better. It doesn't matter what line combinations you throw out there. If you don't do that, you're not going to win games. I don't think we can lose sight of that.

"We have to play the right way. I think the work ethic has really been there for the most part this year. I think that's been really good. And I just think our attention to detail needs to be a little bit better."

Housley's last major reshuffle, when he struck gold with the line of Eichel, Skinner and Reinhart, occurred on Oct. 19 in Los Angeles and sparked a major resurgence.

The next day, Skinner scored a hat trick in a 5-1 rout of the Kings, and the Sabres went 14-2-2 over their next 18 games, including the 10-game winning streak.

"I think just that everybody had a role, an identity," Housley said. "But in saying that, I think we were playing the game the right way back then, making good puck decisions, managing our game, our checking detail was really solid and we have to get back to that. You can mix the lines up all you want, but if you don't manage the game and you don't have a respect for your own end, you're going to get the same results, so we addressed those things and we've got to continue to focus on that moving forward."

Housley said it wasn't an easy decision to break up what had been one of the top lines in the NHL – a move similar to Colorado last week splitting up Gabriel Landeskog, Nathan MacKinnon and Mikko Rantanen – but it was necessary given the team's struggles.

Eichel has two goals and three assists in his last 10 games. Skinner has three goals and three assists in his last 10, with two of those assists coming in the loss to Chicago.

"It's always difficult, especially when they were really rolling," Housley said. "Sometimes we tried to change the lines in between the second and third period, you try to give them an opportunity to dig themselves out of it. It didn't work."

"Some things get stale at times. Or maybe you just need a new look, a new fresh look with new linemates. It was tough, but we're going to try to spread it around, and again, we'll see how that works out. Hopefully it works out for the betterment of our team, but those things are always subject to change, as well."

Sabres recall C.J. Smith from Rochester

By Jason Wolf
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The Sabres recalled forward C.J. Smith, their top scoring prospect, from the Rochester Americans on Monday and will give him another chance to make an impact in the NHL.

"He deserves a shot to get back and an opportunity," Sabres coach Phil Housley said. "I like what he brings, the spark and the speed and the skill. Obviously, he's going to get an opportunity."

Smith, 24, skated on the Sabres' third line alongside center Evan Rodrigues and forward Sam Reinhart during practice Monday, in advance of Tuesday's game against the Minnesota Wild at KeyBank Center.

Smith is leading the Amerks in scoring with 41 points (18 goals, 23 assists) in 41 games.

He has appeared in four games with the Sabres this season.

Smith scored his first career NHL goal in a 5-1 victory against New Jersey on Jan. 9, before being sent back to the AHL two days later, when Jack Eichel returned from an injury.

"It was kind of just a numbers game at the time," Smith said. "They said they liked how I played when I was here and just stick with it and obviously I'm back up here and getting another opportunity."

Smith returned to Rochester with a positive mindset, recording a hat trick in a 5-1 victory at the Toronto Marlies in his first game back.

He racked up 12 points (five goals, seven assists) in eight games before being recalled.

"I just went back with a lot of confidence," Smith said. "I think it kind of showed in my game down there, too. Obviously playing up here, it's a little different pace and a little different level. I just wanted to go back down there and work hard and work for the guys down there in Rochester."

Smith takes the roster spot of Remi Elie, who cleared waivers Sunday and was assigned to the Amerks.

Injury updates

Center Johan Larsson was an extra skater Monday and remains day-to-day with an upper body injury, Housley said. Larsson missed the Sabres' 7-3 loss to Chicago on Friday.

Defenseman Matt Hunwick, who last played in the Sabres' 5-4 victory at Columbus on Jan. 29 and has been dealing with a lower body injury, skated with Nathan Beaulieu as the team's fourth defensive pairing.

Thrust into adulthood, NHL's youngest players learn as they go

By Lance Lysowski

The Buffalo News

February 4, 2019

Casey Mittelstadt sat quietly at his spot in the home dressing room in KeyBank Center and looked over to his left, where a dozen reporters were gathered around Jack Eichel.

Mittelstadt, a 20-year-old center for the Buffalo Sabres, had just left the ice following an exhaustive post-practice skate with his fellow rookie teammates – additional work to get young players acclimated to the grind of an 82-game season. He then expressed unbridled optimism about his progress on the ice.

Mittelstadt was more concerned with an off-ice problem on this frigid, late December morning. "I got a flat tire when I got [to Buffalo], and I just got another one somehow," he said. "I have to get that fixed. It's actually been like that for a while. Other than that, I've had no problems."

Young players such as Mittelstadt, who began his professional career last March at 19 years old after one season at the University of Minnesota, often face more challenges away from the rink when adjusting to life in the NHL. They previously relied on their parents or billet families to cook, clean and do laundry.

Suddenly, these teenagers are far away from home and have no experience with the responsibilities of adulthood. Like most NHL teams, the Sabres do not have one position dedicated to helping players, including veterans, with off-ice tasks. However, people throughout the organization – including General Manager Jason Botterill – are available as resources when players are trying to find a place to live or have any other needs.

Mittelstadt and his roommate, 18-year-old defenseman Rasmus Dahlin, have a number of teammates with whom they can seek advice. After all, Eichel, Jeff Skinner, Sam Reinhart, Kyle Okposo, Zach Bogosian, Tage Thompson and Rasmus Ristolainen were also teenagers when they debuted in the NHL.

Though teammates can be a valuable resource, experiences – both good and bad – are typically the only way to learn, Eichel said.

Bogosian, drafted third overall by the Atlanta Thrashers in 2008, shared a duplex with the team's equipment manager, Joey Guilmet, during his rookie season. Bogosian had experience cooking for himself from playing two seasons with the Peterborough Petes of the Ontario Hockey League, but many of his rookie meals came from the arena or local restaurants because he despised cleaning.

"Any hockey player would say when you walk in the rink you feel at home," Bogosian said. "It's what you do. The off-ice transition was much bigger for me than the on-the-ice-stuff. It's funny looking back now because you don't know about anything. These kids are playing in the NHL and the rest of their buddies are in college -- going to school or partying. You live a different lifestyle at 18 or 19 than most kids do. That's the beauty of it. That's what you work hard for. I grew up quick. You have to if you want to play this game."

Admittedly, Bogosian's transition was much easier than that of the Sabres' youngest defenseman. Dahlin, 18, had already lived away from home for three years when the Sabres drafted him first overall last June. He previously shared an apartment with "two best friends" in Gothenburg, Sweden – 47 miles from his hometown, Trollhattan – while playing for Frolunda of the Swedish Hockey League. That experience taught Dahlin how to prepare his meals and the discipline of cleaning.

Still, Dahlin's mother, Asa, traveled with him to Buffalo following the draft and lived here for nearly two months as he adjusted to life in a new country. That allowed her to help him move, as well as off-ice tasks such as filling out paperwork.

Shortly after Dahlin settled in Western New York, the Mittelstadt family arrived at his doorstep. The two bonded in those early days before training camp, and they have helped each other since. When Dahlin does not feel comfortable making a phone call or has a question about English, Mittelstadt is there to help.

"I was nervous when I got here," Dahlin said. "Coming to an NHL club, it's my dream. ... I was here a month before training camp, so I worked with the trainers and on the ice. No one was really here. It was just me and Casey. It was good to get to know him earlier, so you had one guy before the season started. He's been so helpful."

Eichel had similar help during his rookie season. Shortly after being drafted second overall in June 2015, he received a message from then-Sabres veteran winger Matt Moulson, who offered Eichel a room in his home. Moulson did the same for John Tavares when the two were teammates with the New York Islanders.

Eichel had experience taking care of himself while playing one season at Boston University and during his time with the U.S. National Development Program in Ann Arbor, Mich.; however, Moulson knew such an offer would take some of the stress off Eichel.

"For one, it helps you grow up a lot," Eichel, who was 19 when he debuted with the Sabres in October 2015, recalled of his early days in the NHL. "You see a lot that you wouldn't see otherwise. The biggest thing is you learn to understand people a little bit better. ... You start to mature. The same stuff you do in college and junior isn't going to fly around here. You learn to grow up being around older guys. You learn good habits. It's a lot.

"A teenager's mentality is so much different. When I was coming in, my mentality was probably so much different than Brian Gionta's mentality. At first I really didn't understand that."

Players eventually figure out how to take care of themselves and most call home for advice. Reinhart and Thompson, both former first-round draft picks, have a unique resource: fathers who played in the NHL. Reinhart credited his family with helping him deal with the mental grind – on and off the ice – of his first NHL season.

But failure can be the greatest learning tool, Okposo said. Drafted seventh overall by the Islanders in 2006, he played two seasons at the University of Minnesota and attended Shattuck St. Mary's, a boarding school in Fairbault, Minn., beginning at 14 years old. As a result, Okposo was accustomed to completing many off-ice chores.

There was one exception.

As a rookie in 2007-08, Okposo shared a house with teammates Blake Comeau and Jeff Tambellini near the Islanders' AHL affiliate in Bridgeport, Conn., and was the last of the three to be recalled to the NHL. Upon being sent back to Bridgeport three weeks later, Okposo discovered their house did not have power. He forgot to pay the electric bill.

"It's little stuff like that you don't really think about when you're on your own," he said with a laugh.

A number of former players have struggled with substance abuse or financial management during their early years in the NHL. For example, the Columbus Dispatch reported in 2014 that current Pittsburgh Penguins defenseman Jack Johnson declared for Chapter 11 bankruptcy protection after defaulting on more than \$6 million in debt – the result of his parents mismanaging his finances.

Many young players were not aware of the possible dangers of trusting someone else with their money or surrounding themselves with the wrong people. In an attempt to remedy the problem, the NHL and its players' association launched the Rookie Orientation Program in 2013.

A three-day event, the program serves approximately 80-90 players each summer with a number of speakers and presentations on the topics of financial education, wealth management, personal branding, sensitivity training, substance abuse and life skills. Former players attend to give firsthand accounts on the struggles they faced.

Teams are encouraged to send up to three players whom they believe will help their team in the near future – Mittelstadt, Dahlin and Rochester center Rasmus Asplund, a second-round draft pick in 2016, represented the Sabres at the event last summer in Washington, D.C.

"All the speakers were really good," Mittelstadt said of the event. "They did a good job of filling us in on what it's going to be like. It was more about what to stay away from and what to manage, which was really good. It might be a little overwhelming throughout the week since there are so many meetings, but you're prepared for it."

Those principles and life skills are repeated to young players and veterans when players' association officials make an annual visit to each NHL team during the season. That provides players with a platform to raise any questions and concerns about life away from the rink.

When Skinner was drafted seventh overall by Carolina in 2010, his parents, Andy and Chuffy, both lawyers in the Toronto area, questioned how well the league was preparing 18-year-old players for the drastic transition. Before implementing the orientation program, the NHL and NHLPA conducted a session on the first morning of the draft every year.

Early in Jeff's career, Andy would spend approximately one week in Raleigh, N.C., just to be there in the event help was needed.

"One thing about the NHL and going to Carolina when he was 18 – that was another thing that was important to us – we didn't really want other people parenting," Chuffy said. "We wanted to make sure we still had our oar in the water. You want to be available if they need you or need to talk to you, they have a dilemma or whatever. The NHL doesn't provide a lot of that for 18-year-olds going into this. They're playing with men who have families and so on."

Mittelstadt's father, Tom, has taken a similar approach, though his trips to watch the Sabres are more frequent. Like most teenagers moving into a college apartment, Casey needed help assembling a bed frame and a few other tasks. His car also encountered a flat tire during that first week, and Tom helped with the second flat tire during a trip to Buffalo last month.

When Casey returned to the Minneapolis area for the brief holiday break in December, his family members asked if he missed living close to home. He laughed at the question. Though Mittelstadt and Dahlin are under immense pressure to perform on the ice and are learning to navigate the challenges of adulthood, neither would trade the opportunity for homecooked meals or having someone around to fix a flat tire.

"There are obviously things you need help with and don't know how to do," Mittelstadt said. "My parents do a good job of helping me, so I can just call them and ask them for advice at any point in time. I don't think it's been bad. It's nice having Ras to live with."

"If I was living on my own it might be a little harder, but living with him and helping each other out has been nice."

Housley makes full line changes in practice

By Paul Hamilton

WGR 500

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Buffalo, NY (WGR 550) - When Phil Housley totally shuffled the lines in Los Angeles, the Sabres won three straight and scored 13 goals. Since Nov. 29, the Sabres have been the worst team in the NHL and Housley did it again on Monday. He said, "We're 3-and-7 in our last 10, No. 1. We tried different combinations within the last 10 to 15 games and we're trying to find a balance, maybe a spark and some continuity within the lines, but they're all subject to change."

When the line switch worked the last time, Housley said there were reasons for that, "We were playing the game the right way back then, making good puck decisions, managing our game. Our checking detail was really solid and we've got to get back to that."

"You can mix the lines up all you want, but if you don't manage the game and you don't have a respect for your own end, you're going to get the same results."

Buffalo has two power play goals in its last 11 games, going 2-for-28. Housley said, "It's funny, you look at all the analytics and the metrics and there's a couple of areas like our breakout to entry with possession is a little down, but everything else is good, but we're just not getting results. I think we have two goals in our last 11 games, so we have to take a long look at that."

Jeff Skinner did not play with Jack Eichel in Monday's practice. Instead, he was with Casey Mittelstadt, and the winger is fine with the change, "We're trying to shake things up trying to get a win tomorrow. Mitsy and Pommer are pretty good players, so it was alright."

"Throughout a season lines change all the time whether it's shaking up the lineup or injuries, so everyone in here is a NHL player, so you get to know your new line mates and get a chemistry going as quick as you can."

Skinner has just one goal in his last seven games. Most goal scorers go through slumps and Skinner doesn't panic, "I just keep working, that's just the way the game goes, you're going to go through stretches where everything seems to be going in or you go through stretches where things aren't going in as easy and you've just go to keep trying to get chances and sooner or later, things will start going in."

Last season, Mittelstadt played six games and had five points. He said Jason Pominville was key to that, "I haven't played with Pommer too much this year, but I played with him last year pretty much every game I was here, so I thought we played well together and Skins can play with anyone and he's a pretty special player, so I'm excited."

Johan Larsson was on the ice, but didn't take line rushes. Housley wouldn't say if Larsson will play. All he would say is Larsson is still day-to-day.

Monday's Lines:

Sheary - Eichel - Okposo

Skinner - Mittelstadt - Pominville

Smith - Rodrigues - Reinhart

Girgensons - Sobotka - Thompson

Larsson

Dahlin - Ristolainen

Pilut - Bogosian

Scandella - McCabe

Beaulieu - Hunwick

Nelson

PP1: Skinner - Eichel - Mittelstadt / Reinhart - Dahlin

PP2: Okposo - Rodrigues - Sheary / Thompson (Pilut) – Ristolainen

The Sabres recall C.J. Smith

By Paul Hamilton

WGR 550

February 4, 2019

Buffalo, NY (WGR 550) - With Remi Elie being sent to Rochester on Sunday, the Sabres have called up C.J. Smith from the Amerks.

This will be Smith's second stint in Buffalo this season. He netted one goal in four games. In six total NHL games, Smith has a goal and an assist.

Smith did not pout when he was sent back to the AHL in mid-January as he leads Rochester with 18 goals and 23 assists for 41 points in 41 games. Since being sent back down, Smith scored five goals and seven assists for 12 points. The winger had points in seven of the eight games he played.

In two seasons, Smith has played in 98 AHL games, scoring 35 goals and 50 assists for 85 points.

The Sabres host Minnesota on Tuesday.

In need of balanced scoring — and more of it — the Sabres shuffle their lines

By John Vogl

The Athletic

February 4, 2019

BUFFALO, N.Y. — Jack Eichel, Jeff Skinner and Sam Reinhart are going to show up on the scoresheet. They produce points and, for a short stretch, can lift an entire team.

But having just one line doesn't work forever. In fact, it hasn't worked for more than two months. During that time, Buffalo has reclaimed the dubious distinction of being among the NHL's worst teams.

If the Sabres can lose with Eichel, Skinner and Reinhart together, it's time to see if they can win apart. Here were the lines coach Phil Housley unveiled Monday.

The idea of wholesale line changes didn't come easily to Housley. The coach loved sending his first line over the boards, and it rewarded him. Of the Sabres' 145 goals, Eichel has been on the ice for 75 of them (51.7 percent). Skinner is right behind with 74 celebrations (51 percent), followed by Reinhart with 65 (44.8 percent).

From there, the production drops in a big, big way.

With six consecutive home games that could determine whether Buffalo stays in playoff contention, Housley had little choice but to shake things up.

"It's always difficult, especially when they were really rolling," he said. "You try to give them an opportunity to dig themselves out of it. It didn't work."

Here's a look at the scoring lines Housley hopes will work, though the coach cautioned that they are subject to change. Most stats courtesy of NaturalStatTrick.com.

Sheary-Eichel-Okposo

Sheary could use an Eichel boost. After scoring in three straight games in early November, the left winger has potted just two goals in his past 31.

Eichel has had Sheary on his left side for just 85 minutes this season. They've created their share of scoring chances (38), but they've combined for just two goals.

Despite being the Sabres' highest-paid players, Eichel and Okposo have rarely played together. During the past three seasons, they've skated just 387:46; by comparison, Eichel and Reinhart have been together for 1,238:55. Eichel and Okposo have been outscored 18-10 with a scoring-chance deficit of 158-134.

But Okposo is one of the few players with multiple goals since New Year's Eve, scoring four times to trail just the five goals by Skinner.

"Jack's a world-class player, and he's played at an extremely high level this year," Okposo said. "Yeah, anytime that you get to play with him, you'd like to take advantage of that opportunity. I'm just looking to go play my game, play hard. I feel like I've been going pretty good here the last 15 games, and I like where my game's at."

Skinner-Mittelstadt-Pominville

One of the big storylines this month will be whether Buffalo can extend the contract of Skinner, who is a pending unrestricted free agent. Some may worry that splitting him from Eichel will prompt him to split from Buffalo, but the left winger says daily changes don't impact long-term thinking.

"Jack's a great player, but I think a lot goes into sort of playing on a team," Skinner said. "If we're going to have success, we're going to have to have success as a unit: all four lines, all six D, both goalies. For me, I just want to try to be a piece of the puzzle and sort of contribute in a way that helps the team win."

Yet there's no denying the success of Eichel and Skinner together in terms of goals and scoring chances.

"Throughout the course of a season, lines change all the time," Skinner said. "Everyone in here is an NHL player, so just go on your new line and get to know your linemates and sort of get the chemistry going as quick as you can."

Pominville preceded Reinhart as the right winger for Eichel and Skinner, so the reunited wingers have a history of success (24 goals in 197 minutes). Pominville also played alongside Mittelstadt during the rookie's six-game introduction to the NHL last season. They combined for four goals while attempting 47 shots in 48 minutes.

"I'm excited, for sure," Mittelstadt said.

During the past nine games, Mittelstadt has seen a reduction in minutes and an uptick in production. He's skating just 12:55 per night but has two goals and five points.

The rookie gets a great chance to multiply those alongside Skinner and his 31 goals.

"It's getting better," Mittelstadt said of his season. "Obviously, it wasn't an ideal start. It's not what I wanted, but I think you get more comfortable, start making plays, realize what you can and can't do."

Smith-Rodrigues-Reinhart

Reinhart gets another chance to carry a line. During the past three years, he's played without Eichel almost as much as he's played with him. There's a big difference in goal production.

Smith, who leads Rochester of the American Hockey League with 41 points in 41 games, is back after putting up five goals and 12 points in eight games. Smith and Reinhart join the similarly sizzling Rodrigues, who has four goals and seven points in his past nine games.

For the first time in a while, the Sabres could have three scoring lines instead of one. If they keep giving up 3.6 goals per game, which they've done since Christmas, they'll need them.

"When you change lines like that, it can't distract us from the way that we need to play," Okposo said. "Different lines are going to be different lines, but we have to play better without the puck and we have to defend better.

"We're in a decent spot," he said of sitting three points out of the playoffs. "We're playing meaningful games at this point of the year, and it's only going to get harder. We have to really trust the process, trust the identity that we've forged because that's how we're going to win games."

Reeling Sabres hope new lines, defense pairs can help ignite them

By Bill Hoppe
Olean Times Herald
February 4, 2019

BUFFALO – Sooner or later, coach Phil Housley needed to make some significant changes, right? The Sabres have fallen from first overall to three points out of a playoff spot.

Having compiled an awful 8-14-4 mark in their last 26 games, their marathon slump has surpassed the two-month mark. In their last 10 outings, they're a dreadful 3-7.

In recent games, the Sabres have often shown little interest in playing defense and struggled to score goals. Their power play has also provided little or nothing.

So Monday inside HarborCenter, three days after an embarrassing 7-3 home loss to the Chicago Blackhawks, Housley overhauled everything, switching up his forward lines, defense pairs and power play units.

Why blow it up now?

"We're 3-7 in our last 10, No. 1," Housley said after the Sabres prepared for Tuesday's tilt against the Minnesota Wild inside KeyBank Center. "We tried different combinations within the last 10 games, 15 games. I'm trying to find a balance, maybe a spark, continuity within the lines. Those are all subject to change."

Most notably, Housley broke up NHL All-Stars Jack Eichel and Jeff Skinner, one of the league's premier center-wing duos much of the season. Eichel and Skinner have combined to score 48 goals and 101 points.

"Some things get stale at times," Housley said. "Maybe you just need a new look."

So Eichel centered left wing Conor Sheary and Kyle Okposo. Skinner, meanwhile, skated at left wing beside center Casey Mittelstadt and Jason Pominville. Vladimir Sobotka pivoted left wing Zemgus Girgensons and Tage Thompson.

"A lot goes into playing on a team," Skinner said. "If we're going to have success, we're going to have to have success as a unit – all four lines, all six D, both goalies. For me, I just want to be a piece of the puzzle."

The Sabres also recalled high-scoring winger C.J. Smith from the Rochester Americans on Monday. Smith practiced at left wing beside center Evan Rodrigues and Sam Reinhart.

On the blue line, Housley paired rookie Rasmus Dahlin beside Rasmus Ristolainen, an intriguing duo featuring the Sabres' highest-scoring defensemen. Rookie Lawrence Pilut moved beside Zach Bogosian. Marco Scandella and Jake McCabe also formed a new pair.

"I don't think you really expect stuff like that," Okposo said of the overall changes. "It just happens and you just roll with it. I've been around long enough to see stuff like that."

Housley put Dahlin on the No. 1 power play beside Eichel with Skinner, Reinhart and Mittelstadt up front. On the No. 2 unit, Thompson and Ristolainen manned points with Sheary, Okposo and Rodrigues up front.

Over the last 18 games, the Sabres have converted just 10.6 percent of their chances on the man advantage (five of 47).

The last time Housley made drastic changes to the Sabres, Oct. 19 in Los Angeles, they went on a five-week tear, starting with a 5-1 win against the Kings the next day.

"Everybody had a role, an identity," Housley said of what happened then. "But in saying that, I think we were playing the game the right way back then, making good puck decisions, managing our game, our checking detail was really solid, and we got to get back to that."

"You can mix the lines up all you want, but if you don't manage a game, you don't have a respect for your own net, you're going to get the same result."

Rodrigues said the Sabres "got down to the basics" in October.

"We didn't cheat the game, we played on the right side of the puck," Rodrigues said. "We were doing all the little things right. We weren't worried about scoring or points. We were just all doing the right thing, all being on the defensive side of pucks and we all waited for our opportunities and we capitalized on them."

Like Housley, Okposo understands switching some lines isn't a magical fix for the Sabres.

"Different lines are going to be different lines, but we have to play better without the puck and we have to defend better," Okposo said. "No matter what line combinations you throw out there, if you don't do that you're not going to win many games. I don't think we can lose sight of that."

"We have to play the right way. I think the work ethic has really been there for the most part this year. ... Our attention to detail needs to be a little bit better."

Sabres reward C.J. Smith with promotion from Amerks

By Bill Hoppe
Olean Times Herald
February 4, 2019

BUFFALO – Following a recent four-game look with the Sabres, winger C.J. Smith returned to the AHL and promptly went on a tear, scoring a hat trick in his first outing.

Smith, 24, performed splendidly, recording five goals and 12 points in eight games after the Sabres sent him to the Rochester Americans.

“He got the right message,” coach Phil Housley said Monday after the Sabres recalled Smith again.

Smith, who has compiled 18 goals and a team-high 41 points in 41 AHL games this season, said it’s not in his nature to pout.

“That’s just not the type of person I am,” Smith said. “I’m not going to sulk on anything or quit on anything, especially the guys down in Rochester, too. I’m really close with them and really like the coaching staff, so it wasn’t going to affect who I am or my personality at all.”

Housley said Smith “deserves a shot to get back.”

“I like what he brings – the spark and the speed and the skill,” Housley said.

Smith, who practiced at left wing Monday beside center Evan Rodrigues and Sam Reinhart, basically forced his way up by becoming an elite AHL scorer.

Hours after waiving winger Remi Elie on Saturday to create a roster spot, Smith scored two goals and three points in the Amerks’ 4-1 road win against the Hartford Wolf Pack.

“I just went back with a lot of confidence,” Smith said of Rochester. “I think it kind of showed in my game down there, too.”

Smith also looked confident during his last recall, showcasing his speed and scoring his first NHL goal.

“They said they liked how I played when I was here and just stick with it,” Smith said.

The Sabres host the Minnesota Wild on Tuesday at KeyBank Center.

Sabres shuffle lines looking for spark

By Stephen Lorenzo

Yahoo! Sports

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What a difference two months makes.

The Buffalo Sabres were the darlings of the NHL back in November when they tied a franchise record with 10 straight wins and sat atop the NHL standings at 17-6-2. But since that 10-game winning streak, the Sabres are just 8-14-4 with 20 points, which is tied for the fewest in the league during that span.

During Monday's practice head coach Phil Housley drastically shuffled his lineup and placed his top three scorers – Jack Eichel, Jeff Skinner and Sam Reinhart – on three separate lines. Eichel centered the top line between Conor Sheary and Kyle Okposo, Skinner skated alongside Casey Mittelstadt and Jason Pominville, and Reinhart moved to the third line beside Evan Rodrigues and C.J. Smith.

At 1.13 points per game, Eichel is without question Buffalo's best player. The captain's playmaking ability could help spark Sheary and Okposo, who have both had down seasons, but have shown promise in the past, especially when playing next to superstars. Sheary was extremely productive when skating alongside Sidney Crosby in Pittsburgh. He tallied 53 points and 23 goals in just 61 games during the 2016-17 season with the Penguins. Okposo's best years came in his final three seasons with the New York Islanders, when he registered 69, 51 and 64 points respectively before signing a 7-year, \$42 million deal with Buffalo in July of 2016. A significant portion of those Islander years were spent alongside John Tavares. Both Sheary and Okposo have struggled to find the same consistency since joining the Sabres. Perhaps this is the catalyst to get them going.

Skinner's 31 goals are tied for second in the NHL, trailing only Alex Ovechkin. The pending unrestricted free agent has been a perfect match with Eichel all year and is seemingly in line for a big pay day. He'll now look to find the same chemistry with the 20-year-old Mittelstadt and 36-year-old Pominville. Mittelstadt has struggled mightily with just two goals and six points in his last 19 games. The veteran Pominville has been even less productive, with four points and two goals over his past 25 games.

Meanwhile, Reinhart has 45 points and is on pace for 72, which would shatter his previous career-high of 50 set last season. The rookie Smith has played in just four games this season and six in his young career. He scored his first NHL goal in his last game back on January 8 against New Jersey. Rodrigues has started to pick up the pace with seven points and four goals in his last nine games.

Despite their struggles over the last two months, the Sabres are only three points out of a playoff spot. Now would be an ideal time for them to make a push, as they are in the middle of a season-long seven-game homestand that continues Tuesday night against Minnesota.

Sabres shake up lines ahead of meeting with Wild

By Jourdon LaBarber

Sabres.com

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In search of a spark, the Sabres sent out a new-look lineup for practice at Harborcenter on Monday morning. Jeff Skinner, Jack Eichel and Sam Reinhart were split up to balance the forward lines, while C.J. Smith was recalled after a torrid stretch in Rochester. The defense pairs and power-play units were altered as well.

It's the second time this season that Phil Housley has gone with a whole new look to his lines, the first being when he united Skinner, Eichel and Jason Pominville during a practice in Los Angeles on Oct. 19. The Sabres responded by winning their next three games and earning points in their next five.

"Everybody had a role, an identity," Housley said of that early-season shakeup. "But in saying that, I think we were playing the game the right way back then, making good puck decisions, managing our game, our checking detail was really solid, and we got to get back to that.

"You can mix the lines up all you want, but if you don't manage a game, you don't have a respect for your own net, you're going to get the same result."

That last point was one Kyle Okposo stressed as well, with attention to detail away from the puck having been a point of emphasis in the days following a 7-3 loss to Chicago on Friday.

"Different lines are going to be different lines, but we have to play better without the puck, and we have to defend better," Okposo said. "No matter what line combinations you throw out there, if you don't do that, you're not going to win many games. I don't think we can lose sight of that.

"We have to play the right way. I think the work ethic has really been there for the most part this year. I think that's been really good. I just think our attention to detail needs to be a little bit better."

Next home game: Tuesday vs. Minnesota

Housley said the lines are subject to change, but here's how they looked on Monday:

43 Conor Sheary - 9 Jack Eichel - 21 Kyle Okposo
53 Jeff Skinner - 37 Casey Mittelstadt - 29 Jason Pominville
49 C.J. Smith - 71 Evan Rodrigues - 23 Sam Reinhart
28 Zemgus Girgensons - 17 Vladimir Sobotka - 72 Tage Thompson

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

Johan Larsson returned to practice after sitting out of Friday's game with a lower-body injury but did not skate on a line. He's still considered day-to-day, Housley said.

The most notable change is the separation of Skinner and Eichel, who formed one of the NHL's top scoring duos upon being made linemates in Los Angeles. The Sabres have posted a 61.54 goals-for percentage in 562:19 when both forwards have shared the ice at 5-on-5.

Housley admitted that it was a difficult decision, but Skinner said he's embracing the changes.

"I think throughout the course of a season lines change all the time," Skinner said. "Everyone in here is an NHL player. Just go on your new line and get to know your linemates and sort of get the chemistry going as quick as you can. I thought we did a good job in the drills at practice and we'll just keep getting better."

Reinhart and Rodrigues, meanwhile, have both spoken this season about their comfort playing alongside one another. They've posted a 54.05 Corsi-for percentage in 77:13 together at 5-on-5, and they'll have a rookie aiming to prove himself on their left wing in Smith.

Smith scored a goal on eight shots during his four-game stint with the Sabres in January. The NHL roster got healthy, and he was sent back to Rochester with the directive to stick to his game. He scored a hat trick as part of a four-point, seven shot outing for Rochester in Toronto the following night, then tallied points in six of the next seven games.

"I'm not going to sulk on anything or quit on anything, especially the guys down in Rochester, too," he said. "I'm really close with them and really like the coaching staff, so it wasn't going to affect who I am or my personality at all.

"I just went back with a lot of confidence. I think it kind of showed in my game down there, too."

Smith has 41 points in 41 AHL games this season, which leads the Amerks.

"He deserves a shot to get back and an opportunity," Housley said. "I like what he brings - the spark and the speed and the skill."

The Sabres have six games left on their current homestand, which continues with a visit from the Minnesota Wild on Tuesday. After that, it's a date with the Carolina Hurricanes - a team they're tied with in the standings - on Thursday.

"Obviously, we've got to play better," Mittelstadt said. "Sometimes shaking things up helps, you find some new chemistry. I think everyone's excited."