



Buffalo Sabres

Daily Press Clips

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Eichel and Buffalo take on Detroit

Associated Press

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Detroit Red Wings (14-39-4, eighth in the Atlantic Division) vs. Buffalo Sabres (24-24-8, sixth in the Atlantic Division)

Buffalo, New York; Tuesday, 7 p.m. EST

BOTTOM LINE: Jack Eichel leads Buffalo into a matchup with Detroit. He's sixth in the NHL with 69 points, scoring 31 goals and totaling 38 assists.

The Sabres are 13-15-5 in Eastern Conference games. Buffalo has given up 41 power-play goals, killing 74.4% of opponent chances.

The Red Wings are 7-11-0 against the rest of their division. Detroit is last in the league averaging only 3.6 assists per game. Dylan Larkin leads them with 25 total assists.

In their last meeting on Feb. 6, Detroit won 4-3. Larkin scored a team-high two goals for the Red Wings in the victory.

TOP PERFORMERS: Eichel leads the Sabres with 31 goals, adding 38 assists and collecting 69 points. Sam Reinhart has five goals and four assists over the last 10 games for Buffalo.

Jimmy Howard leads the Red Wings with a plus-zero in 25 games played this season. Larkin has four goals and five assists over the last 10 games for Detroit.

LAST 10 GAMES: Red Wings: 2-7-1, averaging 1.5 goals, 2.6 assists, 3.6 penalties and 8.7 penalty minutes while allowing 2.6 goals per game with a .929 save percentage.

Sabres: 4-5-1, averaging 2.3 goals, 3.4 assists, 2.5 penalties and 5.2 penalty minutes while giving up 2.5 goals per game with a .916 save percentage.

INJURIES: Sabres: Kyle Okposo: out (upper body), Marcus Johansson: day to day (illness).

Red Wings: Filip Zadina: out (lower body), Robby Fabbri: day to day (upper body), Darren Helm: day to day (undisclosed).

Sabres' Jeff Skinner still creating chances in careerlong scoring drought

By Lance Lysowski

The Buffalo News

February 10, 2020

Jeff Skinner does not have answers as to why a season that began with such promise turned into one of the most challenging in his 10-year NHL career.

Skinner insists he isn't feeling any added pressure after signing an eight-year, \$72 million contract after scoring a career-high 40 goals last season with the Buffalo Sabres. His obsession with producing extends into practices during the season and in summer workouts with his skills coach, Bill Bowler.

Skinner expects to put the puck in the net, no matter the situation. He gets angry at himself when a shot sails wide or dings off the post. While Skinner has likely slammed the door of the Sabres' bench more times than he's scored this season, he has hidden expressions of frustration during interviews with the media.

When broached with the topic over the past two weeks, Skinner calmly explained he's learned how to physically and mentally handle scoring droughts since being drafted seventh overall in 2010.

This latest slump might be unlike any he's experienced, though. Skinner's current 18-game goal drought is tied for the longest in his career, matching his mark to end the 2014-15 season. His 10:20 ice time Friday in New York was the lowest since he was traded to the Sabres in August 2018.

"Yeah, I don't think I've been in one this bad, but you've been in sort of similar situations I guess you could draw on it," Skinner, who had seven goals in October, said after he had two shots on net in a 3-2 loss to Anaheim on Sunday. "You can always draw on past experiences, whether it's the physical side and how you're feeling or the mental side, what needs to change and what needs to be emphasized. Those little things, I think, you sort of figure out as you go along. You can definitely lean on those things."

Coach Ralph Krueger has not offered much in terms of a solution. He continues to emphasize that Skinner is a "streaky" scorer the 27-year-old winger's resume includes two separate 13-game goalless droughts from 2017-19 and 17 goals in an 18-game span in 2016-17 – and a need for more scoring chances.

Opportunity hasn't been an issue. In seven games since returning from an upper-body injury, Skinner is first on the Sabres in 5-on-5 scoring chances and tied for first with 14 even-strength shots on goal.

A number of advanced metrics paint a promising picture, particularly Skinner's team-high individual expected goals created at 5 on 5. His 1.02 even-strength goals per 60 minutes rank ahead of Mikko Rantanen, Sidney Crosby, Mark Stone and Jonathan Toews, among others.

Skinner also ranks second on the Sabres behind Jack Eichel in even-strength individual scoring chances, according to NaturalStatTrick.com. However, Skinner has only 11 goals with eight assists in 46 games. His stat line through the first 46 games last season: 30 goals with 44 points. He is also a minus-19 this season, compared to a plus-12 at this point a year ago.

The difference is Skinner's career-low shooting percentage (7.6), a drastic difference from the career-high 14.9% he posted in 2018-19. He hasn't scored a goal since Dec. 2, and the 18-game drought includes only two assists. Skinner has played less than 15 minutes six times during that span, and he's registered zero shots on goal six times this season.

Rehabbing an injury didn't help. Skinner had not played less than 79 games in a season since 2014-15, when he was limited to 71 with the Carolina Hurricanes. He missed 10 games this season after being hit by Boston Bruins winger David Pastrnak on Dec. 27.

"I think he definitely had a setback with the injury, first of all," Krueger said last week. "I spoke to you a lot that in the games leading up to the injury he was really finding his groove. Lots of scoring chances, lots of shots and the goals were just going to come. Then he had that setback. I think right now just getting back to where we

were there. It's normal coming off a long injury after a couple of games you might have a little bit of a dip, and we're also working hard together with Jeff to get him back into that space.

"The pressure of scoring is so big on him, and he needs to park that and create chances again and get involved in our game 5 on 5 and chances will follow. He wants to add and he feels that pressure because we aren't scoring as a team right now. We need to just get him back focused on doing all the other things and have that be a byproduct of his game."

Skinner has 17 shots on goal while averaging 16:06 ice time in seven games since returning. A lack of continuity could also be an issue. Skinner has played with four line combinations during that span, preventing him from creating synergy with the same center and right wing.

Aside from low-risk situations, Skinner isn't playing with Eichel and Sam Reinhart. The Sabres have a 65% 5-on-5 shot differential and 63.32 expected goal share in 37:18 with those three on the ice at the same time this season.

Skinner has spent the bulk of his ice time with Marcus Johansson, who had not been a full-time center since 2011-12. They've played 314:25 at 5 on 5, posting a 46.85% 5-on-5 shot differential and 46.04% expected goal share. Surprisingly, Skinner has been better with Johan Larsson, as illustrated by a 53.61 expected goal share, though Krueger has not used them together since December.

Krueger has expressed no interest in a full-time 5-on-5 reunion for Skinner, Eichel and Reinhart. The Sabres' coach prefers a reliable defensive presence on the left wing, and Jimmy Vesey has excelled in that spot over the past several games. Vesey is only a placeholder until Victor Olofsson returns from a lower-body injury.

Last season at 5 on 5, Skinner, Eichel and Reinhart had a 54.74% expected goal share and plus-8 goal differential. Loading up one line eventually led to a disastrous offensive drought for Buffalo, though system and roster construction could have factored into teamwide struggles.

"He's a streaky scorer," Krueger said of Skinner. "We know that. His career has been streaky. ... I think if Jeff can get one, he'll get one, he'll get many and that's what we're all working together to try to get him to do. Without the puck, he needs to be responsible like everybody for us to have a game like (Friday in New York). ... Jeff needs to execute within that and we believe he'll profit offensively, eventually."

Skinner's output last season wasn't an anomaly. Since the start of the 2010-11 season, Skinner ranks sixth in the NHL with 202 even-strength goals, trailing only Alex Ovechkin, Patrick Kane, John Tavares, Steven Stamkos and Brad Marchand.

Krueger and his staff have struggled to find a power-play role for Skinner, who has zero goals on the man advantage compared to seven through 46 games last season. Skinner has been relegated to the second unit, which doesn't get as much ice time and often includes Eichel attempting to play a two-minute shift.

The second unit doesn't have a defenseman of Rasmus Dahlin's caliber, either.

Generating chances at 5 on 5 isn't much of a consolation for Skinner, though he's had more of the high-danger variety than Eichel this season. Skinner was paid to score goals, and he's searching for solutions to a familiar problem that reared its ugly head at an inopportune time for the Sabres.

"I think you always put pressure on yourself," Skinner said. "Usually guys that get to this level, they're competitive guys. You put pressure on yourself to produce and to help the team win. Obviously, I know my role in helping the team win and producing offensively is one of those things, and I haven't been doing it, so you just have to work through it and try to help the team win as best you can until it sort of turns around."

Sabres trade tiers: Who's the most likely to go? Who's untouchable?

By Joe Yerdon

The Athletic

February 10, 2020

The Sabres were most likely in the position to be sellers at the trade deadline before the All-Star break. Going 2-4-1 to kick off a 10-game stretch after the break (nine of those at home) has all but officially killed the dream of the playoffs.

While Buffalo's recent trade deadline history has been quiet, there are likely going to be deals ahead of or on February 24th. With 10 players on the NHL roster (and three more in Rochester) who will be unrestricted free agents next summer, some guys are going to move. Ideally.

In GM Jason Botterill's two previous deadlines he's made three trades:

In 2018, he sent Evander Kane to San Jose for Danny O'Regan and conditional first and fourth-round picks.

In 2019, he sent Brendan Guhle and a conditional first to Anaheim for Brandon Montour. He also traded Nathan Beaulieu to Winnipeg for a sixth-round pick.

Even in Tim Murray's last year as Sabres GM in 2016-2017, he made just one deadline deal and it was an AHL move sending Daniel Catenacci to the New York Rangers for Mat Bodie. It hasn't been exciting in a while. It probably needs to be exciting now.

So who can be had and how likely it is they'll be moved? I'll do my best here to break it down.

No way, no chance, no how

Jack Eichel (six years remaining; \$10-million cap hit)

He's in the second year of his eight-year, \$80 million contract and he's played at an MVP level this season. He's been everything the Sabres have hoped he would be and more and it's been all for naught this year. That's frustrating. But the Sabres aren't going to trade him and they're not going to accept offers on him. If this thing is going to get turned around it'll be because of Eichel. Of course, if it doesn't get turned around in another few years — yikes.

Rasmus Dahlin (one year remaining on entry-level contract; \$925,000 cap hit)

Dahlin is the other cornerstone in the plan to get out of mediocrity. His incredible rookie season was overshadowed by the second-half meltdown the Sabres had in fading into the NHL Draft lottery. This year started with what looked to be a sophomore slump but has turned around into him looking confident and every bit deserving of the No. 1 pick. The only way you trade him is if you're pulling the NHL version of the plot to Major League. I don't think that's the realm things are in.

Dylan Cozens (three years remaining on entry-level contract; \$925,000 cap hit)

Ukko-Pekka Luukkonen (two years remaining on entry-level contract; \$778,333 cap hit)

I shouldn't really have to say why these two are untouchable. Luukkonen is learning the ropes as a pro in the ECHL and AHL and has the markings of being a possible No. 1 goalie. The organization is investing a lot in him to help make that happen.

Cozens won gold with Canada at World Juniors and Lethbridge is having a very good season in the WHL. The Sabres would love to not have to think about playing him in Rochester or Buffalo this season because it would mean a Memorial Cup run. But next season he'll have every opportunity to make the Sabres out of training camp and slide in behind Eichel as the No. 2 center.

I Think We Should See Other People

Evan Rodrigues (RFA when \$2-million deal expires this summer)

Zach Bogosian (UFA when \$5,142,857-million deal expires this summer)

Both players have asked out and both have seen their ice time affected by doing so publicly. The same thing happened with Beaulieu last season and he wasn't dealt until the final minute on deadline day. The same fate could be waiting for Rodrigues, while Bogosian may not even get his wish. It's been a stressful season for everyone, but it could be a lot more anxious if their trade wishes aren't granted.

Let's get seismic

Sam Reinhart (RFA when \$3.65-million deal expires this summer)

Rasmus Ristolainen (two years remaining; \$5.4-million cap hit)

So you feel like the Sabres need to make a ground-shaking deal that stirs up the locker room and brings back a lot of equal NHL talent in return. We've established Eichel and Dahlin are immediate hang-up-the-phone guys, but Reinhart and Ristolainen? Those are the guys that can make something happen.

Ristolainen we've discussed in this role as a trade chip for years — even more so in the offseason — but now he feels like a legitimate trade asset because he's been better this season. Sure, his fancy stats have fallen as the Sabres' quality of play has dropped in recent months, but it's clear what he brings to the table. There are loads of teams that need defensive help and many teams have the forwards to make a deal happen.

Reinhart, however, is the option we haven't talked about much. We've gone over what to do about a future contract with him, but there's always a "what if" scenario to ponder. It's clear Reinhart and Eichel are a great combo and they can produce, but would you let Reinhart get in the way of making a deal that could bring an objectively better player? It's a hypothetical question meant to be hashed out over a few frothy adult beverages, but if Reinhart lands you a highly productive No. 2 center... would you make that move? It's a hell of a thing to ponder and might make you cross-eyed when you think about Reinhart's junior hockey days as a center, but that's neither here nor there now.

Reinhart has a lot of value and his next contract is going to be a fascinating discussion, but if there was a move that would definitively send a shockwave through the team and its setup in seasons to come, trading him would do it.

Don't sing it — bring it

Victor Olofsson (RFA when entry-level deal expires this summer)

Henri Jokiharju (one year remaining on entry-level contract; \$925,000 cap hit)

Trading guys like Olofsson and Jokiharju has a very "Let's Make A Deal" vibe to it. You kind of know what you have with them and you could trade them for a more known quantity of a player, but that other player could turn into a donkey driving a soap box derby car. Olofsson and Jokiharju represent the weeklong Hawaiian vacation you thought you could upgrade by taking what was behind Door No. 3 or taking what was under the mystery box. Don't get zonked on a trade if you don't have to take the risk.

Hockey Trade™ candidates

Colin Miller (two years remaining; \$3.875-million cap hit)

Jake McCabe (one year remaining; \$2.85-million cap hit)

Brandon Montour (RFA when \$3.3875-million deal expires this summer)

Marcus Johansson (one year remaining; \$4.5-million cap hit)

As much as moving Ristolainen or Reinhart would be a staggering trade, these players represent more realistic options to get NHL players in return. Depending on your opinions on all four players, they all have value across the board for different reasons.

Miller could be viewed as mismanaged in Buffalo given the number of times he's been a healthy scratch. Other teams in need of defense help would see him as a player who could immediately make a difference. McCabe is a hard-nosed defender that does a lot of the blue-collar things that GMs value enough in playoff scenarios to make them forgive other flaws.

Johansson showed last season what he was capable of during the Bruins' run to Game 7 of the Stanley Cup final. The Sabres like him and his veteran abilities in the room, but if a team were in enough need to cough up good value, that would represent a tempting option.

Montour is a bit trickier in that the Sabres gave up a first-round pick and a prospect to get him. Offseason and preseason injuries played a role in a slow start and playing both left and right side on defense has affected his consistency. Moving him now would mean selling low and would be a huge bit of pride for Botterill to swallow. If nothing else, his up and down season may have kept his cost low to re-sign, but he's still due a raise. He's young and has a lot of value and in any other circumstance would make for a tempting player to trade to improve your future roster. Ironic because that's precisely the reason the Sabres got him last season.

The Expendables

Michael Frolik (UFA when \$4.3-million deal expires this summer)

Conor Sheary (UFA when \$3-million deal expires this summer)

Jimmy Vesey (UFA when \$2.275-million deal expires this summer)

Zemgus Girgensons (UFA when \$1.6-million deal expires this summer)

Johan Larsson (UFA when \$1.55-million deal expires this summer)

Scott Wilson (UFA when \$1.05-million deal expires this summer)

Curtis Lazar (RFA when \$700,000 deal expires this summer)

Casey Nelson (UFA when \$812,500 deal expires this summer)

John Gilmour (UFA when \$700,000 deal expires this summer)

Out of this group, the least likely guy to be traded is Lazar based on his future RFA status. He's proven to be valuable to the Sabres in his role and he's all effort, all the time. All the others are available for the right price. You're probably saying something along the lines of, "Trade them all, who cares?" and sure, you can do that on a video game. Here in reality you still need to ice a team at the NHL and AHL levels. Emptying out the NHL roster for picks means moving your AHL guys up and that's not what they're about.

Who are the players that will fetch the best return? For teams in need of depth and energy line players that can defend well and give a lot of effort for the playoff run, Larsson and Girgensons provide the most value. Wilson and Sheary have won Stanley Cups with Pittsburgh and provide help in different types of roles. Same goes for Frolik. Vesey gives a depth scoring option and he's been better of late. The players who are due to be UFAs have future contracts to show off for and while things in Buffalo haven't lent themselves well to that, a trade to a contender or a playoff challenger would be a blessing for them.

Not all of them are going to go and, hell, maybe none of them go. Even though managing cap hits gets easier as the season goes along, teams still need to stay under the limit. If you're moving out a player, it means taking a similar contract back in return which opens up a different challenge as to whether the players coming back are a fit for how they want to move ahead.

Unlikely to move — RFA edition

Lawrence Pilut (RFA when entry-level deal ends this summer)

Linus Ullmark (RFA when \$1.325 million deal expires this summer)

Tage Thompson (RFA when entry-level deal expires this summer)

Casey Mittelstadt (RFA when entry-level deal expires this summer)

They're all young, they're all under team control, and they're all at different points of their development and health. If the Sabres are trading any of these players, it would signal an organizational shift in belief. There hasn't been anything to indicate something like that is ongoing. They've spent a lot of time developing Ullmark into a starter and they've given a lot of time working to make the others better players in Rochester. If they're worked into any trades it'd be part of a blockbuster type of move out of the blue which we'd spend years debating the merits of.

Unlikely to move for obvious reasons

Carter Hutton (one year remaining on \$2.75-million deal)

Jeff Skinner (seven years remaining, \$9-million cap hit)

Kyle Okposo (three years remaining, \$6-million cap hit)

Vladimir Sobotka (UFA when \$3.5-million deal expires this summer)

Matt Hunwick (UFA when \$2.25-million deal expires this summer)

2020 first and second-round picks

Cost and performance and health all play a role in everything. Hutton has struggled terribly this season and wouldn't make for an attractive option to deal. Skinner is in the midst of a career-worst slump, struggling to score away from Eichel, and has a lot of years and money to go. Okposo, Sobotka, and Hunwick are all out long-term and the Sabres need to make use of the LTIR freedom from Sobotka and Hunwick's contracts.

With three years left, Okposo makes us all wish his health was better because we didn't see enough of him at his best and likely won't for the rest of the deal. He's played well as a forechecker with some scoring touch, but at \$6 million a year that's a heavy burden.

The problem with always needing to keep the prospect coffers filled is that using picks in trades can set a team back even further if the return doesn't work out as expected. The Sabres don't have third-round picks in 2020 or 2021, which puts a hard focus on getting their first and second-round picks in those years right. The picks aren't untouchable and could get swapped around in the same round or used to acquire other high picks, but those moves happen rarely.

Sabres' Jeff Skinner battling marathon slump, still playing down lineup

By Bill Hoppe

Olean Times Herald

February 11, 2020

BUFFALO – At worst, you figured Sabres winger Jeff Skinner would score 25 or 30 goals this season. But having performed so dynamically most of last year, hitting 35 or even 40 again seemed possible.

Skinner and top Sabres captain Jack Eichel formed a lethal duo a year ago. For the first time in his career, Skinner, 27, had an elite center feeding him the puck, and he responded by scoring 40 goals.

When Skinner parlayed his career season into a massive eight-year, \$72 million contract in June, it appeared Eichel, 23, might remain his personal center for years.

Fast forward to today, and Skinner, who recently missed 10 games with an upper-body injury, is mired in a marathon slump. He has a career-long 18-game goal drought entering tonight's contest against the Detroit Red Wings at KeyBank Center.

"I don't think I've been in one this bad," said Skinner, who hasn't played regularly on a line with Eichel all season.

Skinner has suffered a stunning decline, scoring just 11 goals in 46 outings and compiling a wretched minus-18 rating while skating on the second or third line. He scored his 11th goal last year on Nov. 8, his 16th appearance.

Sabres coach Ralph Krueger has said for months he separated Skinner and Eichel to balance the lines. He likes having a defensive presence on each trio.

Before suffering a lower-body injury, rookie Victor Olofsson thrived in Skinner's old spot at left wing beside Eichel, scoring 16 goals in 42 games.

Olofsson is still sidelined. The Sabres have slumped badly, losing six of their last eight games. They're out of the playoff chase. They're generating little offense.

At this point, what does Krueger have to lose by putting Skinner back beside Eichel, who has remained with Sam Reinhart? Skinner, who hasn't scored since Dec. 2, desperately needs a boost. He has mustered just two assists in that stretch.

So far, Krueger has refused to move him up.

"He needs a lifeline," said one scout who has watched Skinner regularly throughout his career, including this season. "They need to throw him one."

In Sunday's 3-2 loss to the Anaheim Ducks, Skinner played with center Evan Rodrigues and Conor Sheary. Rodrigues has registered three assists in 34 games this season.

Skinner has spent most of the year skating with Marcus Johansson, who was switched to center, a position he hadn't played regularly since his rookie season in 2010-11, during training camp.

The scout said Skinner doesn't "make others better around him unless he is scoring."

"He needs to play with skilled players who can get him the puck in scoring areas," he said. "He has proven he can score in the NHL. I believe he needs to play with Eichel and Reinhart, but for some reason beyond my comprehension the coaches have been reluctant to do that. Why? I am not sure.

"But for him to get back on track he needs to play on that line for him to live up to his new contract and to give the Sabres more scoring five-on-five. They are married to this player. He is not going to change or reinvent himself."

Skinner has averaged 29 goals over his eight full NHL seasons, doing most of his damage at even strength. He has scored only 45 of his 208 career goals on the power play. He scored just eight times on the man advantage last season.

He registered his last power-play goal 72 games ago, way back on Feb. 15, 2019.

In tough times, Skinner, who also endured an 18-game goal drought to close the 2014-15 season, said he tries to draw on his past experiences.

"Whether it's the physical side and how you're feeling or the mental side, what needs to change and what needs to be emphasized?" he said. "Those little things, I think, you sort of figure out as you go along. You can definitely lean on those things."

Krueger did not lean on Skinner much in Friday's 3-2 road win over the New York Rangers, skating him a season-low 10 minutes, 20 seconds.

"There was no goal to get to those minutes," Krueger said. "I was actually surprised at those minutes myself."

Krueger said he wanted his players to take shorter shifts – Skinner averaged 38 seconds – and he still went on the ice as regularly as he would've during a 13- or 14-minute night.

"What we need Jeff to be doing is getting scoring chances," he said. "We're working hard together with him to get him into those spaces, and he's working hard to find those spaces. He's a streaky scorer, we know that. His career's been streaky. His injury took him out of a space that was really a good space, and he's on his way back into that space."

"I think if Jeff can get one, he'll get many, and that's what we're all working together to try to get him to do. I mean, without the puck, he needs to be responsible like everybody for us to have a game like (Friday). It was one of our most responsible games – definitely the most responsible game since the (NHL All-Star) break – and ... Jeff needs to execute within that, and then we believe he'll profit offensively eventually."

Naturally, Skinner is putting pressure on himself to produce.

"I know my role in helping the team win and producing offensively is one of those things," said Skinner, who scored one goal during a 22-game stretch late last season. "I haven't been doing it so you just have to work through it and try to help the team win as best you can until it sort of turns around."

Notes: The Sabres sent goalie Andrew Hammond, who was recalled Sunday to replace Carter Hutton, back to the Rochester Americans on Monday. ... The Sabres had Monday off. ... The Red Wings beat the Sabres 4-3 in overtime Thursday.

Sabres assign Hammond to Amerks

By Chris Ryndak

Sabres.com

February 10, 2020

The Buffalo Sabres today announced that the team has assigned goaltender Andrew Hammond to the Rochester Americans (AHL).

The Sabres recalled Hammond before yesterday's game against the Anaheim Ducks, where he served as the backup to Jonas Johansson. Goaltender Carter Hutton was not available due to family circumstances, and Linus Ullmark is out with a lower-body injury.

Hammond, 31, is 13-10-2 with a .904 save percentage in 27 games with Rochester this season. He's played 56 NHL games in his career, posting a record of 27-15-6 with a .923 save percentage.