



Buffalo Sabres

Daily Press Clips

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Buffalo hosts New York after shootout victory

Associated Press

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New York Rangers (1-3-1, eighth in the East Division) vs. Buffalo Sabres (2-3-1, seventh in the East Division)

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

BOTTOM LINE: Buffalo hosts the New York Rangers after the Sabres took down Washington 4-3 in a shootout.

Buffalo finished 10-12-2 in division games and 20-11-4 at home during the 2019-20 season. The Sabres recorded 315 assists on 193 total goals last season.

New York went 14-8-0 in division action and 19-12-3 on the road in the 2019-20 season. The Rangers scored 233 total goals last season, 52 on power plays and eight shorthanded.

The teams square off Tuesday for the first time this season.

INJURIES: Sabres: None listed.

Rangers: Justin Richards: out (health protocols).

Rasmus Ristolainen, Jake McCabe an 'outstanding,' shutdown pair for Sabres

By Lance Lysowski

The Buffalo News

January 26, 2021

When Rasmus Ristolainen and Jake McCabe are on the ice, chasing a loose puck behind the Buffalo Sabres' net isn't for the faint of heart.

Even entering the Sabres' zone can be difficult, as Jakub Voracek of the Philadelphia Flyers discovered last Monday in Wells Fargo Center. As soon as the six-time 20-goal scorer chipped the puck into his offensive zone, he was leveled by Ristolainen on a body check at the blue line.

"Risto has been excellent also in leading our physicality," Sabres coach Ralph Krueger said of Ristolainen, a 26-year-old defenseman. "If a player on the other team does anything, he will feel it the next game."

The same goes for anyone challenging McCabe, a 27-year-old who was arguably the team's best all-around defenseman at 5 on 5 last season. Last Tuesday, Flyers defenseman Phil Myers suffered a fractured rib when attempting to hit McCabe at the red line, and Philadelphia center Morgan Frost dislocated a shoulder on a clean check by McCabe behind the Sabres' net.

Buffalo's top defense tandem has contributed more than physical play during the Sabres' 2-3-1 start to the season. Entering Monday, among all pairings in the National Hockey League, Ristolainen and McCabe had allowed the second lowest on-ice shot quality at 5 on 5, according to Evolving-Hockey.com.

Aggressive play in the neutral zone and a lighter workload have allowed Ristolainen and McCabe to limit opponents' time in the Sabres' zone, and in turn, providing Buffalo's offensive firepower with more opportunities to score goals.

"Me and Risto, we've played a lot of hockey over the years together, so there's a lot of familiarity," said McCabe. "I love playing with him. He's one of the best physical defensemen in this league and playing with a guy like that, we haven't been spending too much time in our own end so I think we've done a really good job of killing plays and getting the puck moving in transition to spend more time in their end, which has been a good stretch for us."

The Sabres' truncated schedule – including 10 games in 18 days during January – has caused Krueger to spread the minutes for his defense pairs. Through six games, Ristolainen and McCabe have skated together at 5 on 5 for 81:04, according to NaturalStatTrick.com. After the first six games of the 2019-20 season, the pair was on the ice together for 101:52.

The results are markedly different. Among 31 defense pairs to play at least 60 minutes together this season, McCabe and Ristolainen rank fourth in 5-on-5 shot-attempt differential. When the pair is on the ice together at 5 on 5, the Sabres have a plus-5 goal differential with 16 high-danger chances for compared to 5 against.

Their shot quality share at 5 on 5 ranks fifth among all defense pairs in the NHL.

"I think our gaps have been really solid through the neutral zone and we've made it really hard on whoever we're playing against," McCabe said. "So, just need to continue to talk out there. Our communication's been great. Just need to continue building."

The difference is simple: McCabe and Ristolainen have exemplified the aggressive defense Krueger wants in the neutral zone. Both are quick to challenge the puck carrier at the Buffalo blue line and red line, which often rushes the opposing forward into a decision. This has led to neutral-zone turnovers and, in turn, rush chances for the Sabres' offense.

Teams aren't entering the Sabres' zone with ease and a dump-and-chase approach hasn't been effective against the defense pair. As McCabe noted, communication has allowed them to avoid significant blunders down low. The defenseman retrieving the loose puck behind the Buffalo net has support, meaning the other is positioned nearby to receive the outlet pass and start the breakout. Opponents also have trouble parking in front of the Sabres' net when McCabe and Ristolainen are on the ice.

The pair played more than 500 minutes at 5 on 5 together in 2019-20. Among 56 defense pairs to play at least 300 minutes together, Ristolainen and McCabe had the 15th-lowest on-ice shot quality against. But a more passive approach in the neutral zone resulted in fewer scoring chances, as illustrated by their posting the fourth-worst on-ice shot quality for.

Although Ristolainen's inconsistent play has been maddening to fans across his seven-plus seasons in Buffalo, it appears McCabe has brought out the best in the former eighth overall draft pick.

"Whatever McCabe has done, he is playing at the top of his game," Krueger said. "He's solid defensively but adding a nice touch offensively and gives us, really, another tool. We're pleased with him. ... So really, really, been an outstanding pair for us and very reliable in both directions. Just a pleasure to see them start the season this way."

McCabe, who has appeared in 346 games since 2014, led all Sabres defensemen in on-ice shot quality against at 5 on 5 last season. He ranks 11th among all NHL defensemen in the metric this season and seventh in 5-on-5 shot-quality share. The former second-round draft pick is in his second consecutive year as an alternate captain and is scheduled to be an unrestricted free agent at the end of this season.

Ristolainen, meanwhile, has sharpened some details in his game. The misfired, rushed breakout passes are becoming more infrequent. The nuances of his defensive game – wall play, boxing out in front of the net, breakouts, etc. – merit high minutes and the responsibility of playing against top opponents.

Yet, Ristolainen isn't receiving as heavy a workload. His 22:17 ice time per game leads all Sabres, but it ranks 51st among NHL defensemen and is four fewer minutes than his total from 2017-18 when he totaled a minus-25 rating. By no means has his game been flawless – Ristolainen's play in the offensive zone could be better, particularly when deciding whether to pass or shoot – but aggressive play, mixed with sound reads without the puck, has made this pairing the backbone of the Sabres' defensive game.

"I think the biggest thing, first of all, was to recover, forget hockey, refresh mind, and then start working out," Ristolainen said of his 10 months of training. "This offseason I probably skated the most I have during the summer, so working on my skating, fitness on the ice, skating, shooting, puck handling. Probably off the ice the main thing was speed and explosiveness."

Roster moves

The Sabres returned goalie Jonas Johansson to the taxi squad Monday, and assigned forward Rasmus Asplund and goalie Dustin Tokarski to Rochester.

Johansson, 26, stopped eight of nine shots last Tuesday while filling in for Carter Hutton, who left the game in Philadelphia after taking an elbow to the head. Hutton did not go on the trip with the Sabres to Washington, and he was expected to be evaluated Monday.

Stempniak hired

Former NHL forward Lee Stempniak, a West Seneca native, was hired by the Arizona Coyotes as the team's hockey data strategist. The 37-year-old will apply his knowledge from 14 NHL seasons and an education from Dartmouth College to serve as a liaison between the Coyotes hockey operations/analytics department and the team's coaching staff.

Across 911 regular-season games, Stempniak totaled 203 goals and 266 assists while playing for 10 different teams. He has not played since appearing in two games for the Boston Bruins in 2018-19.

Schedule

The Sabres did not practice Monday and will hold a morning skate Tuesday in preparation for their game against the New York Rangers in KeyBank Center. This will be the first NHL game in Buffalo for Rangers winger Alexis Lafreniere, the first overall draft pick in October.

What the Sabres' first six games have shown about their still-forming identity

By John Vogl

The Athletic

January 25, 2021

With the flick of Patrick Mahomes' wrist, the Buffalo sports spotlight has flipped to the Sabres.

Are they ready for it?

"I'm pretty happy with the way our team's trending right now," captain Jack Eichel said.

The Sabres' opening six games, more than 10 percent of the 56-game schedule, have provided a glimpse into their still-forming identity:

- Eichel and Taylor Hall can dominate together, as expected.
- The goaltending remains shaky.
- Coach Ralph Krueger is going to do it his way.
- Rasmus Ristolainen is playing better than Rasmus Dahlin.
- The power play and penalty kill are a rollercoaster.
- The East Division is living up to the hype.

It has resulted in a 2-3-1 record that puts Buffalo in the bottom third of the NHL despite being competitive most nights.

"In a 56-game season, unfortunately we're going to have to rely on results maybe a bit more than the process," Hall said. "We're not going to be able to settle for too many moral victories throughout this year, so it's important for us to get results and hopefully pretty soon."

Hall and Eichel have combined for 13 points in the opening six games. Amazingly, they have just one goal. Eichel has no goals and seven assists while Hall has one goal and five helpers.

"I'm on a little bit of schneid right now, trying to get off of it," Eichel said. "As soon as one goes in, they'll all start coming."

The Sabres' stars have certainly had their chances, as Natural Stat Trick illustrates.

CATEGORY	EICHEL/HALL	OPPONENTS
Corsi	91	58
Scoring chances	39	20
High-danger chances	13	3
Goals	3	4

Eichel ranks 10th in the league with 23 shots but is obviously last with a shooting percentage of zero. It's part of a team-wide trend. The Sabres are second in the NHL with 34.8 shots per game but are tied for 26th with a shooting percentage of 8.1 percent.

Other Sabres with abnormally low shooting percentages include Jeff Skinner (no goals on 18 shots) and Hall (one goal, 19 shots, 5.3 percent).

"The goal, obviously, is how many goals you have at the end of the night and how many they have," Hall said. "It doesn't matter how many shots you have or how many Grade A chances."

That's especially true when pucks are entering the Sabres' net at high rate. Buffalo is allowing the ninth-fewest shots per game at 27.3 but Linus Ullmark, Carter Hutton and Jonas Johansson have a combined save percentage of .901.

It hasn't been easy for Ullmark and Hutton. Ullmark missed two games in Philadelphia following the death of his father. Hutton exited Tuesday's game against the Flyers with a probable concussion after getting elbowed in the head. He hasn't rejoined his teammates.

"It's been rough, definitely," Ullmark said. "There's a lot of emotions and thoughts that had to be processed. Trying to take it day by day. Try to be happy when I'm happy, try to be sad when I'm sad."

The good news for the Sabres and their goalies is they've allowed only three power-play goals after being historically bad last season. But there's bad news attached. They've cut down the goal total by being amazingly disciplined. Buffalo leads the NHL in fewest penalty minutes, a paltry 4:10 per game as 26 teams average seven minutes or more.

The penalty-kill unit ranks tied for 28th with just a 66.7 percent success rate. That number has to increase or the Sabres need to continue to stay out of the box at all costs.

The power play, meanwhile, has gotten blanked in three games and exploded in others. The Sabres went 3 for 5 against the Capitals on Sunday, which accounted for all of their goals in a 4-3 shootout win. They rank 10th in the league at 27.3 percent.

"It's going to be a big weapon for us," Eichel said.

It could become more effective if Dahlin discovers his game. The 20-year-old has had a forgettable start, which includes getting benched for half a game in Washington. Dahlin has no points and is a team-worst minus-5 in even-strength scoring despite starting in the offensive zone 70 percent of the time.

Dahlin has had several meetings with assistant coach Steve Smith.

"We're showing him the good things and what needs to be established," Krueger said.

The tape of good things would feature clips of Ristolainen. He leads Buffalo defensemen with three points and tops the team with a plus-4 even-strength goal differential. His Corsi is 56.7 after being at 44.4 during his first seven seasons. Ristolainen is also tied for sixth in the league with 25 hits.

"I love playing with him," blueline mate Jake McCabe said. "We haven't been spending too much time in our own end. We've done a really good job of killing plays and getting the puck moving in transition to spend more time in their end."

McCabe and Ristolainen are the only defense pair to stay intact. Krueger has shuffled Dahlin, Brandon Montour, Henri Jokiharju and Colin Miller with varying degrees of success.

Some of the coach's other lineup decisions have been ... interesting. Dylan Cozens scored his first NHL goal Friday and watched the next game from the press box, no doubt dampening his buzz. Skinner is 15th on the Sabres in even-strength ice time at just 12:12 per game.

But Krueger hasn't been wed to his choices. He started Tage Thompson on the first line but bumped him down then scratched him twice when it didn't work. The coach has moved around Victor Olofsson and Cozens to find more offense. He even split up Eichel and Hall for part of Sunday's victory.

It's clear the Sabres need to keep winning. They sit seventh out of eight teams in the East Division, ahead of only their next opponent, the New York Rangers. They are the only two East teams with a losing record. Washington, New Jersey, Boston and Pittsburgh rank in the top 10 in points percentage while the Islanders and Flyers are in the top 16.

The Sabres' shooting and save percentages will have to trend up for Buffalo to stay afloat and move up.

"We can clean up some things," Eichel said. "The five-on-five scoring will start to come more. But, as a group, I think we're happy with our game. The results haven't necessarily been there in terms of wins and losses, but we think we're trending in the right direction in terms of establishing an identity as a group."

Versatile Riley Sheahan fitting in well with Sabres: ‘He does everything right’

By Bill Hoppe

Olean Times Herald

January 25, 2021

BUFFALO – The Sabres haven’t found many Riley Sheahan-types – a low-cost role player capable of providing valuable minutes and moving around the lineup – over the past decade.

Myriad factors have contributed to the Sabres’ struggles, and their inability to add depth through trades or free agency ranks near the top of the list.

But the versatile Sheahan, 29, quickly established himself after signing a professional tryout contract to attend training camp. He earned a one-year, \$700,000 deal on Jan. 8 and solidified his spot as a fourth-line winger and penalty killer before opening night.

“He does everything right,” Sabres coach Ralph Krueger said on a Zoom call last week. “Like, from the very first day, we just said, ‘This guy’s a pro.’ ... He just fits into our culture. He gets the plan.”

Sheahan said the personalities in the locker room – “A lot of character,” he said – help create a welcoming environment for new players.

“It’s just a fun group to be around,” Sheahan said Saturday.

The Sabres, who begin a four-game home stand tonight against the New York Rangers, have performed better than their 2-3-1 record might indicate. Sheahan’s line – he skates at right wing beside center Curtis Lazar and Jeff Skinner – has contributed from the get-go.

The trio has already scored three goals – Lazar has two and Sheahan one – as many as the top line of center Jack Eichel, Taylor Hall and Sam Reinhart.

“Playing with Skins and Lazar, we’ve built some good chemistry,” Sheahan said. “It’s fun, we’ve kind of been feeding off each other out there.”

Sheahan’s line ranks behind two combinations Eichel has centered this season in goals for per 60 minutes with 2.13, according to MoneyPuck.com.

“Lazar’s line with Sheahan ... and Skins creating a lot of opportunity just gives you that depth that we need,” Krueger said.

On Friday, Sheahan scored a slick goal by grabbing the puck down low before driving to the net and backhanding the puck. Earlier in the week, he registered the primary assist on one of Lazar’s goals, feeding him a nifty pass in front.

“(Lazar) works so hard and I think he creates a lot of chances from it,” Sheahan said. “In the D zone, he’s so smart. With the puck, he never really gives up too crazy chances. ... We’ve been clicking really well.”

Sheahan and Lazar, of course, are used to playing down the lineup. Skinner, however, usually skates on the first or second line.

Despite having zero goals this season, Skinner has showcased strong chemistry with his linemates – he played with Lazar part of last season – and consistently created scoring chances.

“When he has the puck, he’s so dangerous and he creates things out of nothing,” Sheahan said. “So he’s been great. We’re generating a lot of chances and putting some goals on the board. I think when one comes, they’ll all start.”

Sheahan said he has spent about 90% of his NHL career playing center, so skating as a winger has been a new adventure for the veteran.

But the Sabres' system doesn't isolate Sheahan, who has won a whopping 72.7% (16 of 22) of his faceoffs this season. The freedom he enjoys on the ice has helped him acclimate to the Sabres, his fifth NHL team in four seasons.

"If I end up in the D-zone first, I'll act as a centerman and on faceoffs, things like that," said Sheahan, the 21st overall pick by the Detroit Red Wings in 2010. "So, yeah, it is new. But I think with our system, a lot of it's kind of just being creative and filling in for spots you see are needed."

Notes: Eichel has scored zero goals this season despite pumping 23 shots on goal. However, the captain has recorded seven assists and scored the shootout winner in Sunday afternoon's 4-3 road victory against the Washington Capitals. ... The Sabres also play the Rangers on Thursday at KeyBank Center before back-to-back afternoon games against the New Jersey Devils on Saturday and Sunday. ... Rangers rookie winger Alexis Lafreniere, the top pick in October, has recorded zero points in his first five NHL games. ... The Sabres had Monday off.

Sabres make goalie moves, also assign Rasmus Asplund to Amerks

By Bill Hoppe

Olean Times Herald

January 25, 2021

The Buffalo Sabres today assigned goalie Jonas Johansson from the active roster to the taxi squad, a sign Carter Hutton could be ready for Tuesday's home game against the New York Rangers.

Hutton left last Tuesday's 3-0 loss in Philadelphia after Flyers defenseman Ivan Provorov hit him in the head. Johansson replaced him for the final period.

Goalie Linus Ullmark has started the last two games.

The Sabres also sent forward Rasmus Asplund and goalie Dustin Tokarski from the taxi squad to the Rochester Americans' training camp. The Amerks begin their season Feb. 5.

Asplund has played one NHL game this season.

Sabres loan Johansson to taxi squad, assign 2 others to Amerks

By Chris Ryndak

Sabres.com

January 25, 2021

The Buffalo Sabres announced today that the team has loaned goaltender Jonas Johansson to the team's taxi squad. Forward Rasmus Asplund and goaltender Dustin Tokarski have been reassigned from the taxi squad to the Rochester Americans (AHL).

Johansson, 25, made his season debut on January 19. He stopped 8 of 9 shots against the Flyers in 20 minutes of action after relieving an injured Carter Hutton to start the third period. Hutton is considered day-to-day with an upper-body injury.

The Sabres will host the New York Rangers on Tuesday at 7 p.m. at KeyBank Center. Pregame coverage begins at 6:30 on MSG.

Stay tuned to Sabres.com, the team's official social media platforms and the brand-new Sabres app for the latest news.