



# **Buffalo Sabres**

## **Daily Press Clips**

*January 28, 2021*

## **New York takes on Buffalo on 4-game skid**

Associated Press

January 27, 2021

New York Rangers (1-4-1, eighth in the East Division) vs. Buffalo Sabres (3-3-1, sixth in the East Division)

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

**BOTTOM LINE:** New York aims to stop its four-game skid when the Rangers take on Buffalo.

Buffalo finished 30-31-8 overall and 10-12-2 in division action a season ago. Goalies for the Sabres allowed 2.9 goals on 30.9 shots per game last season.

New York finished 14-8-0 in division action and 19-12-3 on the road during the 2019-20 season. Goalies for the Rangers compiled a .908 save percentage while allowing 3.0 goals on 33.9 shots per game last season.

The teams meet for the second game in a row.

**INJURIES:** Sabres: None listed.

Rangers: Justin Richards: out (health protocols), Filip Chytil: out (upper body).

---

The Associated Press created this story using technology provided by Data Skrive and data from Sportradar.

## **Sabres much improved in the faceoff circle**

By Miguel Rodriguez

The Buffalo News

January 27, 2021

The Buffalo Sabres' special teams units earned the right take a couple bows Tuesday night because the power play and penalty-kill units did their part during a 3-2 victory over the New York Rangers.

Buffalo went 3 for 3 on the penalty kill and 2 for 4 on the power play. Nice.

It should be noted, though, that the power play and penalty kill may have not been as effective if not for the attention-getting work by the Sabres' centers in the faceoff circle.

Buffalo went 39-17 against the Broadway Blueshirts. A win percentage of 70%.

That total included the Sabres going 12-4 in the circle during the third period. Buffalo won four of five in the defensive zone during the final 20 minutes – including the last one won by Cody Eakin with under 33 seconds to go against the Rangers, who were on the power play and had the goalie pulled for the extra skater.

A team can't score without possessing the puck.

For the season, the Sabres rank fourth in faceoff win percentage at 55.3%. That's considerably better than last season when the team ranked dead last in the league at 45.9%. The only teams that rank ahead of Buffalo's 55.3 are Boston (58.6), the New York Islanders (56.8) and Toronto (55.7).

"I think we're able to put any centerman out there at any given time and win those 50-50 battles," said Eakin, who won 12 of 19 draws Tuesday. "Your job is winning those starting possessions instead of chasing the puck for that shift. It's just bearing down on those important details."

The Sabres ranked last in defensive-zone faceoffs during 2019-20 at 44.4%. The same held true at the offensive end with a success rate of just 45.5%.

Heading into Thursday night's rematch with the Rangers at KeyBank Center, the Sabres rank second in defensive zone faceoff percentage wins at 60.8% and stand sixth in offensive zone percentage at 57.5.

Eakin, acquired via free agency to replace the departed Johan Larsson, has made a sudden impact as he ranks 11th in the NHL in faceoff win percentage among those who have taken at least 50 draws at 59.4%. Another newcomer, center Eric Staal, has won 53.7% followed by Jack Eichel at 51.7%.

"We've got five centerman kind of dressed any given night to take draws," said Curtis Lazar, who currently stands at 46.7% after finishing last season at 51.25%. "Some nights some guys are going to be hotter than the other. We think we understand the importance of playing with the puck and we're looking at the assumption there that's the first battle in a sequence. It shows we're engaged. It's an area of the game that's really risen. Cody's led the way with his unique faceoff style. ... As a whole, we take a lot of pride in that."

Folks can debate the importance of faceoffs toward a team's overall success. What isn't debatable is how much easier it is to go on the offensive if a team starts the play with the puck. The Sabres have been able to do that a bit easier this year because of the additions Eakin and Staal.

Eakin came into the season a career 50% in the faceoff circle. He's hit his stride the past four years, winning more than 50% of his draws since the start of the 2016-17 season. Staal has had a faceoff percentage of 50% or better 10 of the past 12 seasons.

"Big strong guy. Likes to get low on the draw," said Staal on Eakin's style.

Success in the circle can be contagious. Dylan Cozens won the draw that led to his power-play goal that tied the game at 1. Eichel's game-winner came on the power play after he won a draw in the Rangers' end. Eakin's final faceoff win made it easier for the Sabres to milk the clock.

"A lot of our guys are taking pride in that part of the game," Staal said. "I mean there are so many small parts of the game that are detail-oriented ... There's different guys in different roles to be committed to that job. We have those guys here which is huge ... especially on the penalty kill."

#### Quotable

Sabres head coach Ralph Krueger on the team's defensive play, including the penalty kill: "When you have that defensive foundation, you have a chance to win every night. It is a foundation that is much stronger. ... Our penalty kill got some well deserved confidence last night. Lots of good things happening on the defensive side and that's how you give yourself a chance every single night."

#### Henri sits out

Defenseman Henri Jokiharju was the lone Sabre not to participate in Wednesday's fast-paced practice session. He's still nursing what Krueger said is an upper-body injury.

"It's truly a moderating day," Krueger said. "We'll see how he is in the morning but we thought it was better for him to have another day of rest."

Matt Irwin filled in for Jokiharju and earned the coach's praise for doing well in his first game action not just of the season but since last March. Irwin was a member of the Anaheim Ducks, who didn't make the 24-team playoff once the NHL resumed from its Covid-19 pandemic hiatus.

He earned the assist on Tobias Rieder's breakaway goal in the second period, which tied the game at 2-2 seconds after the Sabres killed off a penalty.

"He had that lengthy break like we did last year," Krueger said. "To play your first NHL game after such a long layover when the rest of the guys have already had six or seven under their belts, he did not look out of place at any point in the game."

## **Sabres rather stingy when it comes to scoring chances-against**

By Paul Hamilton

WGR 550

January 27, 2021

Buffalo, NY (WGR 550) - The Buffalo Sabres are one of the better teams this season at limiting the opponents' Grade-A scoring chances.

The problem is the team's save percentage. Every game, Linus Ullmark is improving his save percentage, as it's up to .912. Carter Hutton is at .899, and Jonas Johansson's save percentage is .889 in just one period of work.

Overall, the Sabres are 16th in defense with a 2.86 goals-against average, but they're stingy at giving up great scoring chances.

Part of the reason is the improved play of Jake McCabe and Rasmus Ristolainen. Both have had very good starts to the season, and may be playing the best hockey of their careers.

Another reason is it's Year 2 under Ralph Krueger's system.

"It's the group's buy-in from the past players that have returned, and the high buy-in from the new players creating that defensive synergy that we that we're looking to have consistently," the Sabres head coach said.

Krueger has said since he's gotten to Buffalo that if the team follows the system defensive, the offense will also come.

"When you have that defensive foundation, you have a chance to win every night, and that's what we drifted in and out of last season," Krueger added. "It is a foundation that is much, much stronger and it is the understanding and the belief in that builds that defensive game."

Cody Eakin was signed to play a good two-way game and help with the penalty killing.

"The communication is huge," the 10-year veteran said after practice on Wednesday. "The system, the communication within the system, the guys willing to put themselves in the right places to get there, to work without the puck and just bear down when it comes time. It's all creating opportunities for us to limit those chances and turn the puck around to go the other way."

Eakin has also done very well at faceoffs, winning 59.4% of the draws he takes.

Curtis Lazar has been playing a regular shift with Jeff Skinner and Riley Sheahan. He said there are other reason why the team is doing better.

"I think the team speed has increased, and a big part of that is putting pucks in places where we can retrieve them. And if there's a puck we can't get, we pull out and lock down the neutral zone," Lazar said following practice. "But we're at our best when we're on our toes forcing the other teams to make plays under pressure."

On Wednesday, Henri Jokiharju missed his second practice with, what Krueger called, a minor injury. Matt Irwin had a very good debut on Tuesday against the New York Rangers and could get his second game on Thursday night.

Wednesday's lines:

Forwards:

Hall - Eichel - Reinhart

Olofsson - Staal - Cozens

Rieder - Eakin - Okposo

Skinner - Lazar - Sheahan

Tage Thompson and Casey Mittelstadt were skating as the extra forwards.

Defense:

McCabe - Ristolainen

Irwin - Montour

Dahlin - Miller

Davidson – Borgen

## **Former Sabres forward Matt Moulson finds a sweet situation in Hershey**

By John Vogl

The Athletic

January 27, 2021

Matt Moulson has been around his kids a lot during the past year. There have been math classes, mealtimes and movie nights, typical of many families in this pandemic era.

But he certainly didn't expect to hear their voices during practice.

"Hi, Daddy!" 8-year-old Mila and 7-year-old George suddenly shouted from the scoreboard. "We're so excited to announce that you've been named the 44th captain of the Hershey Bears."

The unexpected news was exciting on its own. To hear his kids say it went right to Moulson's soul.

"I was holding back tears watching the jumbotron," Moulson said Wednesday. "My family, they sacrifice a lot to let me play this game I love, more so than ever this year. It was very touching. I get emotional just rewatching the video.

"I've had a lot of special moments in my career and that was right up there, if not the most special thing that I've had so far."

Kyle Okposo will second that.

"When I saw the video, I got emotional," said Okposo, Moulson's former teammate and George's godfather. "Matt's a lifelong friend and I know how much that means to him deep down. To have his kids share that experience is definitely a special thing."

The moment is another memorable high that no one could have foreseen a few years ago. It looked like Moulson's career was over following a tumultuous stay in Buffalo, where his game disappeared along with his passion for it.

But the rejuvenated 37-year-old is back for a 15th professional season as captain of the AHL's most storied franchise. Moulson led the Bears with 22 goals last season after burying 28 with Ontario in 2018-19. Both totals ranked in the AHL's top 20.

Assuming more leadership away from the ice was a natural progression. Aside from last year's AHL All-Star Game, it's the first time Moulson has worn the "C" since skating for Cornell University in 2005-06.

"It's an honor to represent this organization as a captain," Moulson said from the Bears' arena in Hershey, Pa. "Coming to Hershey was an unbelievable experience in terms of the organization, the team, the city. It was all the things I loved.

"And, obviously, my love for the game didn't go away."

That's the main reason he's back on the ice. The forward strongly hinted that last season would be his last. He wanted to reach 1,000 professional games, which he did last January.

But with his scoring touch and passion back, it just didn't seem right to say goodbye.

"Maybe a championship last year and I would have taken my horse and rode into the sunset, but I think I still have a lot of love for the game, some more to give," Moulson said. "Maybe now I've changed my stance to retire when Tom Brady retires, so we'll wait on him."

The smiles and sense of humor that rarely appeared in Buffalo are back on steady display for Moulson. He even joked about the captaincy video.

"I'm very grateful that my wife kept it secret, which she's not too great at," he said of Alicia.

If these were normal times, Moulson would have invited the Bears to his house for drinks to celebrate the captaincy. Instead, they'll have a good time during their limited interactions at the rink.

He's had the game taken away from him before, so he knows players should enjoy whatever form of hockey they're getting now. As it stands, there won't be Calder Cup playoffs and the Bears are playing 36 games exclusively versus Wilkes-Barre/Scranton, Lehigh Valley and Binghamton.

"They should realize how grateful they are to be playing hockey at this time and have a job. We've seen a lot of people where that's not the case," Moulson said. "There's still a lot to play for. There's guys that want to play in the NHL, establish themselves as great pros at the AHL level.

"No. 1, you owe it to yourself to make sure you're going out there every day at 100 percent."

And if any teammates are ever feeling down about their situation ...

"They can come over and put my kids through homeschooling for a couple days," Moulson said. "It will make them a little more grateful for the rink."

Conversely, seeing his kids at the rink made Moulson beyond grateful. His daughter and son have reached an age where they know what dad does and what a captaincy means, so having them announce the "C" will always be significant for Moulson and his closest friends.

"I'm happy that he came back this year," Okposo said. "Whether it's his last year or not, to go through everything he's been through in his career and to see it culminate with him wearing a 'C' is pretty special."



## **Cody Eakin, Tobias Rieder and Sabres' other newcomers already contributing**

By Bill Hoppe

Olean Times Herald

January 27, 2021

**BUFFALO** – With 33 seconds remaining Tuesday and the Sabres clinging to a one-goal lead against the New York Rangers, coach Ralph Krueger sent out center Cody Eakin to take a critical draw in his own zone.

Eakin has quickly become a trusted faceoff specialist, winning 59.4% this season. With winger Taylor Hall serving a boarding penalty and goalie Alexandar Georgiev on the bench for an extra attacker, the Sabres desperately needed the puck.

Eakin beat Mika Zibanejad, his 12th win of the night, and the Sabres eked out a 3-2 victory, improving to 3-3-1.

Captain Jack Eichel's first goal, of course, received most of the attention following the game, and why wouldn't it?

Eichel, despite having seven assists, hadn't scored this season. His second-period goal, his first in more than 10 months, held up as the winner.

But Tuesday's victory featured contributions from up and down the lineup. Four low-profile veteran newcomers played critical roles.

In recent seasons, many of the Sabres' offseason additions have flopped or performed well under expectations. The term "Sabre-ized" has become part of the local hockey vernacular. Players arrive in Buffalo and suddenly stop producing.

Not this year. Consider what the Sabres, who host the Rangers again Thursday at KeyBank Center, have already received from some of their new additions:

– After sitting out the first six games as a healthy scratch, defenseman Matt Irwin made his season debut Tuesday, skating 17 minutes, 57 seconds and recording an assist. Irwin, 33, also helped the Sabres kill all three Rangers power plays.

"After all that time off, the work he's been doing, being that seventh D for so long," Krueger said on a Zoom call following the game. "He stepped up with an outstanding game today, and that's exciting to see when you bring a guy like that off the bench."

– Winger Riley Sheahan has won 23 of his 29 faceoffs – a staggering 79.3% – including a critical defensive-zone draw with 97 seconds left Tuesday and the Sabres in a six-on-four situation.

Sheahan, 29, has registered one goal and two points and helped solidify the Sabres' best fourth line in years by moving from center to the right side. He also kills penalties.

– Winger Tobias Rieder scored a nifty breakaway goal Tuesday, tying the game two seconds after a penalty expired. Rieder, 28, has scored two goals and skates beside Eakin at even strength and as a penalty killer.

– While Eakin, 29, is pointless, he has anchored the third line and helped the Sabres improve their penalty killing, which ranked second-worst in the NHL last season.

His faceoff percentage stands second on the team behind Sheahan. Eakin, who signed a two-year, \$4.5 million contract, is the only one of the four who has a multi-year deal worth more than \$700,000.

"We've gotten key contributions from different guys," said center Eric Staal, an offseason acquisition who has a three-game point streak. "You saw that yesterday with Eaks taking some huge faceoffs, Rieder obviously had a big goal, a good defensive effort to finish the game (Tuesday) with some key guys making great plays. That breeds confidence."

So what has helped the new faces acclimate so quickly? Krueger said they've joined a "group that is already built on good people."

"First of all, everybody's having fun in the right way," he said Wednesday. "Fun means you're not always smiling. You've heard me speak about that before. It means that there's an honest, hard work going on in the environment."

Sabres center Curtis Lazar said the personalities in the dressing room create a welcoming atmosphere.

"We have such a good group of guys and we have so much fun," Lazar said. "We're so close and we're tight with each other. Coming after such a lengthy layoff (because of the COVID-19 pandemic), we're excited to be back together and we welcome them with open arms.

"Their personalities have nothing but added to our dressing room and added results, too."

Krueger said he and rookie general manager Kevyn Adams targeted character role players in the offseason who would embrace their responsibilities. Last season, they had too many players wanting too much.

"We really felt on the defensive side we were weak last year," Krueger said. "As an example, we might've had up to 10 players in a lineup at any time where pretty well all 10 wanted to play the power play. Whereas now, we have real clear role definition within the group where everybody embraces the role that they have and is proud of that and carries it out with that kind of diligence, preparation."

Eakin has noticed how much the Sabres prepare before going on the ice.

"Attention to detail in meetings transitioning onto the ice is huge," he said.

Krueger said: "They've been unbelievable students at our meetings. They're asking excellent questions, they reach out to the coaches permanently to deepen the knowledge base, and all that is leading to what you're seeing right now."

## **Sabres' Henri Jokiharju misses practice; Matt Irwin impresses Ralph Krueger**

By Bill Hoppe

Olean Times Herald

January 27, 2021

BUFFALO – An upper-body injury kept Sabres defenseman Henri Jokiharju from practicing today for the second straight day.

Jokiharju, 21, missed Tuesday's 3-2 win over the New York Rangers.

"It's truly a monitoring of day to day of when the right moment is to bring him back in," Sabres coach Ralph Krueger said on a Zoom call. "We'll see how he is in the morning, but we thought it was better to have another day of rest today."

Krueger has described the injury as "very minor." The Sabres play the Rangers again Thursday at KeyBank Center.

In Jokiharju's place Tuesday, defenseman Matt Irwin made his season debut, skating 17 minutes, 57 seconds and recording an assist.

Irwin, 33, hadn't played an NHL game since March 11 with the Anaheim Ducks.

"To play your first NHL game after such a long layover when the rest of the guys have had already six under the belt, he did not look out of place at any point in the game," Krueger said. "It just shows, we've said what a pro he is, we've said how hard he's been working away from (us) when we were playing; it's an attribute to having that character ... and that ability to step in, shows also how smart he is as a player.

"He's got good feet, embraced the system and the principles within it 100 percent. I'm really impressed with that game of Matty's yesterday."

## **Some NHL fans allowed to attend games, what about the Sabres?**

By Jeff Rusack

WKBW

January 27, 2021

BUFFALO, N.Y. (WKBW) — With Governor Andrew Cuomo ending COVID-19 orange and yellow zones in Western New York, outdoor arts and entertainment venues are now allowed to re-open. Indoor venues still have to wait, including the KeyBank Center.

Elsewhere, National Hockey League fans are starting to return to the arena. The St. Louis Blues announced Wednesday that next week 1,400 fans, season ticket holders, will be allowed to return for home game.

So, when will Buffalo Sabres fans be allowed to watch games inside the KeyBank Center?

"We are in regular communication with New York State with the hope of returning fans safely to KeyBank Center in the near future," wrote Chris Dierken, the director of media relations for the Buffalo Sabres.

The state allowed some fans to attend Buffalo Bills playoff games, by testing fans before the event. Is that pilot program being considered for indoor arenas?

"Governor Cuomo has been clear that choosing between public health or the economy is a false choice – the answer must be both – and as part of his 2021 State of the State, the Governor proposed creating a rapid testing network to help businesses and venues reopen as we continue to fight COVID. New York's first-in-the-nation testing pilot program at two Buffalo Bills playoff games showed promising results. We continue to work closely with professional sports teams and venues, letting data and science drive our decision making to allow economic activity in the safest way possible," said Will Burns, the first deputy press secretary of the governor.

So, will Sabres fans be allowed back this season? The hope is, yes. The question of when, is still unknown.

## **Newest Sabres already making big impact on the ice**

Mary Margaret Johnson

WIVB

January 27, 2021

BUFFALO, N.Y. (WIVB) — Heading into Thursday night's second match up against the New York Rangers, the Sabres have a 3-3-1 record. With captain Jack Eichel leading the team with eight points, including his first goal of the season that was the game winner for Buffalo on Tuesday, Sabres newcomers have already made an impact on the ice.

"They've come into a group that's already built on good people. Everybody's having fun in the right way. That was here already with the core group that we brought with from last season, and now these players were all selected on that merit of strong character and specific role players that would 100% embrace those responsibilities. The group has come a cohesive unit quite quickly," Sabres head coach Ralph Krueger said. "They've been unbelievable students at our meetings, they're asking excellent questions, they reach out to the questions permanently to deepen the knowledge base, and all of that is leading to what you're seeing right now, that they are truly Buffalo Sabres full on here."

The Sabres made a big splash signing former NHL MVP Taylor Hall in the offseason, and through seven games, He has become a major addition to the team. Hall scored the first goal of the year for Buffalo in the season opener, and since then, has added five assists to tie Victor Olofsson for the second-most points on the team with six, behind Eichel.

"We have such a good group of guys, we have so much fun, we're so close, we're tight with each other. Coming off such a lengthy layoff, we're all in the same boat. We're excited to be back together and we welcome with open arms," Sabres center Curtis Lazar said. "Their personalities have done nothing but added to our dressing room and it adds on the ice too. They've added some different elements and roles and they're really helping us out."

Along with the addition of Hall, the Sabres added Eric Staal, Cody Eakin, Tobias Reider, Matt Irwin and Riley Sheahan in the offseason. After playing in the junior league for the 2019-20 season, Dylan Cozens made his major league debut with the Sabres this season.

"It's a great group of guys, it didn't take long to get acclimated with the coaching staff, management, and the players in the system. It's a great group of guys, really welcoming, a group that really works hard," Sabres center Cody Eakin said. "The attention to detail in meetings to transition to the ice is huge, guys are willing to put in the work and it makes it easy when guys are going out there, working, and working for the same cause."

Staal has two goals and two assists through the first seven games. Cozens has three points, two goals and an assist. Reider has two goals so far, one in the season opener and the other in Tuesday's game against the Rangers. Sheahan has a goal and an assist, and Irwin has one assist on the season.

A deadly penalty killer on the ice, Cody Eakin has also won 53% of the face offs he's attempted already this season.

"I think the excitement from both sides probably is a pretty big key. Guys that were already here were excited to have the additions, and the guys coming in were excited about what was already here," Sabres center Eric Staal said. "The combination of that, and it takes time to feel totally comfortable and confident, but we're making progress and certain moments at certain times we've gotten key contributions from guys. You saw that yesterday with Eakin taking some huge face offs, Reider with the big goal, good defensive effort to finish the game from some key guys making great plays. That breeds confidence, hopefully everyone feels a part of what we're doing here and we just keep progressing."

## **Hamilton: Keys to Sabres recent success**

By Paul Hamilton

WGRZ

January 27, 2021

BUFFALO, N.Y. — When you start the season at home and go 0-2 in an NHL shortened season, you already have yourself in trouble.

The Sabres did just that and then hit the road for four games against Philadelphia and the Capitals.

With no preseason games, Eric Staal looked awful, Tage Thompson looked nervous and tentative, and Sam Reinhart was AWOL for 4.5 periods.

The Sabres lost the second game to Washington 6-4, but in the third period, you could start to see a different team. Buffalo walked into Philly and absolutely demolished the Flyers on national TV, 6-1. Reinhart started playing with Jack Eichel and Taylor Hall and scored twice, Curtis Lazar netted two goals from the bottom six and defensively, Buffalo hardly gave up anything in front of Carter Hutton.

After that horrible start, the Sabres have picked up points in four out of five games going 3-1-1. The biggest thing I've seen through seven games is Jake McCabe and Rasmus Ristolainen are playing the best hockey of their careers. Buffalo is close to the league lead at limiting high quality chances, and you can see Linus Ullmark's numbers improving on a nightly basis.

On Tuesday against the New York Rangers, Buffalo took a 3-2 lead into the third period and reverted back to the way they used to play and allowed the Rangers to come at them. New York outshot Buffalo 15-2, but Ullmark made the big saves, especially when the Rangers had a 6-on-4 power play.

In the game Dylan Cozens and Jack Eichel scored power play goals. After the captain netted his first goal of the season, Buffalo had scored on five out of seven power play attempts.

To get better this season I said the Sabres would have to improve their special teams drastically. Going into action on Wednesday, Buffalo was eighth in the NHL with the extra man scoring at a 30.8 percent clip. Even after going 3 for 3 on the penalty kill Tuesday, the Sabres entered Wednesday 22nd at 75%. That still needs to improve if they have any shot at the playoffs.

It's really amazing that the Sabres are 3-3-1 and tied for fifth in the East with New Jersey considering Eichel, Hall and Jeff Skinner have combined for two goals. Hall scored in his first game and hasn't hit the back of the net since. Skinner gets chance after chance after chance and still can't score goals. Most fans want to blame Ralph Krueger for this, but considering the scoring chances that he creates, it's 100% on Skinner. He needs to be held accountable for his own play.

With three home games coming up against the Rangers and New Jersey Devils, Buffalo has pulled to within two points of Pittsburgh, Philadelphia and Boston. To make the playoffs, you only have to catch one of them. I do find it interesting that in the East, only Washington and the Bruins have a plus in the goal differential column.

So how do the Sabres improve more than they already have? First, Eichel, Hall, Reinhart and Skinner can't all be in a slump together.

Second, Dahlin has to settle down on defense. He's doing a great job quarterbacking the power play with quick movement from the point, but he has the yips defensively. Krueger benched him for almost half the game in Washington and I have noticed an improvement since he's been back.

Third, McCabe and Ristolainen must continue to make it difficult for opposing forwards. Before he got injured a few years ago, McCabe was Buffalo's best defenseman. He seems to be that again.

Fourth, the goaltending must continue to make the big saves. Hutton did it in Philadelphia before getting hurt and Ullmark seems to be coming on. Ullmark is also the clear starter and Hutton said he's come to grips with that.

I also want to mention one more player that played in his first game as a Sabre on Tuesday night. Matt Irwin was stellar. He's played in big playoff games and has played on good teams in San Jose and Nashville. I told Adam Benigni when they signed him that Irwin is the perfect No. 6 defenseman and Krueger has made a huge mistake not using him. When Henri Jokiharju is ready to return from injury, Irwin should not be the guy coming out.

## **Eric Staal Among Sabres Newcomers Fitting In**

By Ted Goldberg

Spectrum News

January 27, 2021

BUFFALO, N.Y. — The Sabres traded for Eric Staal last year to be a veteran presence and a solid second-line center. Through seven games, he's been both, even if it took a few games to get a handle on Ralph Krueger's system.

### What You Need To Know

- Eric Staal says he needed some time to learn how to play with his new teammates and adapt to Ralph Krueger's new system
- Staal, who was held without a goal or assist in his first two games with the Sabres, has now recorded a point in four of his last five games
- The Sabres got a big boost from new players in their win Tuesday - Staal assisted on rookie Dylan Cozens' power-play goal, and Tobias Rieder scored a breakaway goal after helping to kill a penalty

"If you're consistently going on the ice, getting chances against or goals against, you're not doing anybody any good," says Staal, who was acquired from Minnesota in exchange for Marcus Johansson over the offseason. "So I wanted to make sure I was aware of that initially and then try to build my game from there. So it's progressing. Still think there's a lot more there for me personally."

"It's clear. When you come into a new set of principles, sometimes you have to think a little bit more early on until they become automatic," says Krueger. "But you can see how high his game intelligence is. Already the way we want to function here is the norm for him."

Staal is one of the noticeable new names to help the Sabres win back-to-back games. On Tuesday, he assisted on a Dylan Cozens goal, before Tobias Rieder got the equalizer after killing a power play.

"I think guys that were already here were excited to have some of the additions come in, and I think the guys that were coming in were excited about what was already here," says Staal.

Staal and the Sabres will go for their third straight win Thursday when they rematch with the Rangers.



## **Inside the Sabres' revamped power play**

By Jourdon LaBarber

Sabres.com

January 27, 2021

Ralph Krueger spoke to the rarity of the Sabres' depth on the power play Tuesday, after both units scored for the second straight game during a 3-2 win over the New York Rangers

"We have two units firing right now," Krueger said. "That really is lethal. Very few teams have that kind of productivity from both units."

The numbers back that claim. The Sabres are one of three teams with 10 different players who have tallied a point on the power play. Only the Toronto Maple Leafs, with 12, have more.

Buffalo has five goals on its last nine power-play attempts, raising its season conversion rate to 30.8 percent. That number ranked eighth in the NHL entering play on Wednesday.

Part of it is new personalities, with Eric Staal, Dylan Cozens, and Taylor Hall among the newcomers who have already made impacts. But the other key to its success is the increased unpredictability of a top unit that features four returning players from last season.

Sabres.com spoke with assistant coach Don Granato on Wednesday for an inside look at how the team revamped its power play for 2021.

Willingness to improvise

Buffalo's top unit had also been red-hot to start last season as players settled into natural positions. Jack Eichel and Victor Olofsson proved to be lethal shooting one-timers from the left and right flanks, respectively. Sam Reinhart facilitated from down low while Rasmus Dahlin played quarterback at that point.

It grew stale as opposing penalty kills became more aware of where the threats were coming from. Buffalo finished 20th on the power play at 18.9 percent.

"I do believe we got to a point where we were predictable," Granato said. "That's part of why we want to be more versatile."

The Sabres saw some success experimenting with players in different positions at the end of the season, from placing Rasmus Ristolainen at the net-front to dropping Dahlin to the flank. They have taken that creativity to another level in the early part of 2021.

In its basic structure, Buffalo's top unit still has the same four players in their traditional spots - Eichel and Olofsson on the flanks, Reinhart down low, and Dahlin at the point - with Hall joining in the bumper position in the slot.

But the goals are coming from everywhere. Eichel scored his first of the season Tuesday on a one-time shot taken from the slot. Reinhart scored in Philadelphia from the left flank position typically occupied by Eichel. Any of the five players could be in any spot at any time.

"We are advocating that," Granato said. "We are pushing for that and we believe that falls in line with the creativity that they actually desire. The skill that they have is suited for that. It's suited for multiple positions and movements. So, they've embraced it."

The unit features two No. 1 overall picks in Dahlin and Hall and two No. 2 selections in Eichel and Reinhart, plus one of the game's most lethal shots in Olofsson. Making it work not only requires skill, but an ability to read off another.

The addition of Hall has been one of the key's to unlocking the unit's creativity. Hall had never played the bumper position at any point in his career, yet he embraced the opportunity from early on. He challenged himself to play the way he would want a teammate to in that position, having spent time at both flank positions in the past.

Hall scored from that spot in his Sabres debut, pouncing on a pass from Olofsson that seemed headed toward Reinhart at the back door.

"He's as intense a competitor as there is," Granato said. "So, when he knew that was his spot ... he took it upon himself as he does after practice and through meetings to try to figure out the best way to develop or the best way to attack that as an opportunity.

"He sees things as an opportunity. ... 'Jeeze, I've played there, I've played there, I've never played here before. But I want to figure this out and I want to maximize this.' That's what I've seen from him and that's why he's been able to exploit, take advantage of opportunities there. He's hungry for it."

#### High expectations

Granato credits the second unit's success to the leadership of two individuals in particular: Staal and Ristolainen. Both players, he says, have high expectations that show in the way they communicate with teammates.

"It's in lots of different manners," Granato said. "It is coming off (after power plays). It's before the puck drops. It's in our meetings or right after our meetings, they'll follow up with the personnel. It's in practice. Their initiative is prevalent in any form."

They also provide depth, with both players carrying the resumes and skills to suggest they could capably jump to the top unit if the situation demanded it. For now, they anchor a group that features defenseman Colin Miller on the left flank, Jeff Skinner down low, and Cozens at the bumper position.

Granato compares Cozens' versatility in the middle to that of Hall's, with the ability to support high and low and left to right along with the constant threat to shoot. Cozens buried a one-time shot Tuesday that began with a quick succession of passes from Ristolainen and Staal.

That fact that Staal has been situated next to Cozens both on the bench and in the dressing room makes things that much easier.

"Eric does a tremendous job communicating with him," Granato said. "Not only a great job communicating, but the messaging is great as well. He's a very experienced guy by virtue of games, but (also) success. He just knows what intricacies matter and he's really conveyed that. It certainly makes our job as coaches a lot easier."

#### Different looks

The two units present varying challenges for opposing penalty kills. Where Eichel and Olofsson demand respect as shooters on the flanks, Staal's first inclination may be as a playmaker. Dahlin offers a left shot at the point; Ristolainen shoots right.

Past looks remain in the toolbox, even if only for one game based on the demands of a specific opponent. That means you could see Ristolainen back in front of the net or Dahlin back on the half wall.

"Obviously it's been going good recently, but we're always looking to say, 'What might be next for us as teams figure us out?'" Granato said. "What might be the next adjustment or tweak? So, yes, we keep all of those things in mind."