



Buffalo Sabres

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Hall, Eichel separated as Sabres search for balanced 5-on-5 scoring

By Lance Lysowski

The Buffalo News

January 29, 2021

The initial pitch that lured Taylor Hall to Buffalo included Ralph Krueger's vision of the former Hart Trophy winner joining forces with Sabres captain Jack Eichel.

With the team in search for 5-on-5 scoring, and Sam Reinhart day to day with an upper-body injury, Krueger has pivoted ahead of back-to-back games against the New Jersey Devils in a series that begins Saturday in KeyBank Center at 1 p.m.

Hall, whose seven points through eight games rank second on the Sabres, skated on a line in practice Friday with Eric Staal and Dylan Cozens. Eichel, meanwhile, took rushes with Victor Olofsson and Tage Thompson, who filled in for Reinhart.

Reinhart will be evaluated before puck drop Saturday morning, but the Sabres are prepared to play without the four-time 20-goal scorer. The 25-year-old has not missed a game since the 2016-17 season and has six points through eight games.

Hall noted that Staal's presence also influenced his decision to sign with the Sabres in October.

"He's still got it," Hall said of Staal. "He's big, he's lanky, he can move well out there and just a veteran guy that knows where to be. Knows where to put pucks for his linemates and I'm excited. Whether I'm playing with Jack or Eric, that was my thought coming into this year – there are two really good centermen to play with here and that can create matchup problems for other teams, hopefully. And with Sam maybe being out (Saturday), that's where we're at. We're going to have to have some balance throughout the lineup and have guys contribute."

Krueger moved Hall off the top line previously – including the third period of the Sabres' 3-2 overtime loss to the New York Rangers on Thursday – when the offense lagged. The change may also benefit Hall, who has not recorded an even-strength point in five games. His only goal occurred on the power play.

Hall isn't alone, though. The Sabres are tied for 16th in the National Hockey League in 5-on-5 scoring, as Buffalo has only two even-strength goals over the past three games. There are encouraging signs, most notably that the Sabres' 23 high-danger scoring chances during that span rank 10th in the NHL, according to NaturalStatTrick.com.

Goalie Linus Ullmark and the power play have helped the Sabres secure points in five of their last six games.

The top line hasn't been the issue. Among lines to play at least 60 minutes together this season, Hall, Eichel and Reinhart rank 11th in generating shot quality at 5-on-5, according to Evolving-Hockey. Krueger is searching for balance, though, and Eichel has chemistry with Olofsson stemming from their time skating together last season.

One possible downside to the shuffling is Hall was still getting used to playing with Eichel and Reinhart.

"I think more than anything, it's been adjusting to different linemates or the overall atmosphere that we have here," Hall said. "I think it's been good. I thought my first six games, for me, personally, were really solid. The last two have slipped a little bit, but I feel comfortable enough that I can get to my game and help our team as much as I can."

This will be Hall's first game against New Jersey, the team with which he won the Hart Trophy in 2018. He was on track for another strong year in 2018-19 before he was derailed by a knee injury and recovery prevented him from having a proper summer of training entering last season. Hall was then traded to the Arizona Coyotes in December 2019 and became an unrestricted free agent in October. It won't be much of a reunion, though. The Devils have turned over much of their roster since Hall's 93-point season led them to the playoffs in 2018.

"Obviously, winning MVP in '18 was probably the pinnacle of my career so far, and I have a lot of people to thank for that," Hall said. "New Jersey fans were great to me, and I have nothing but great things to say about the area and the team. Unfortunately, a lot of the guys that I played with over the years aren't there anymore. ... It was a

fun time to play there. Unfortunately, my last two seasons weren't the way that I wanted to be. I had a really good start to '18-19 and got hurt, and then last year I was just coming back from an injury and I get traded 25 games in. A little bit of a tumultuous ending, but overall, I have great thoughts about New Jersey and my time there and what it was able to do for me as a player."

Jokiharju returns

Defenseman Henri Jokiharju is on track to return from his two-game absence. Jokiharju, 21, rejoined the Sabres for practice Friday and skated on a defense pair with Brandon Montour.

Jokiharju did not play in the two-game series against the New York Rangers because of an undisclosed injury. He has one goal with a minus-1 rating while averaging 17:17 of ice time across six games this season.

"Joki looks initially good," Krueger said. "We're testing him now, with the skate today. ... He looked fresh, and my feeling is he was pain-free there."

Quinn on the mend

Right wing Jack Quinn, the Sabres' most recent first-round draft pick, is recovering from what Krueger described as a "very minor" upper-body injury. Quinn, 19, is currently on the team's taxi squad, but he is expected to join the Rochester Americans when he is ready for game action.

"It's been fantastic to have him here with us, he's still with us, and just a real treat whenever you get to speak to him," Krueger said of Quinn. "He's got the eyes wide open; he's taking on everything that's going on around him here, and he's learning and growing just by being here."

Devils' absences

Devils forward Travis Zajac will have to wait to play in his 1,000th career NHL game. Zajac, a 35-year-old center who has skated in 998 games, joined goalie MacKenzie Blackwood in Covid-19 protocol and won't join the team for the trip to Buffalo this weekend.

With both unavailable, former Rochester Americans goalie Scott Wedgewood is expected to start one of the two games against the Sabres. Wedgewood, who played for the Amerks in 2018-19, has a .900 save percentage in four games with the Devils this season.

Amerks signings

The Amerks signed winger Remi Elie and defenseman Nicholas Welsh to American Hockey League contracts for the 2020-21 season.

Elie, 25, has spent parts of the past two seasons with the Amerks, totaling 16 goals and 11 assists in 59 games. A waiver claim by former General Manager Jason Botterill, Elie skated in 16 games with the Sabres in 2018-19.

Welsh, 23, attended the Sabres' Prospects Challenge in 2018 and spent the past two seasons at Saint Mary's University in Nova Scotia.

Sam Reinhart 'day to day' for Sabres with an upper-body injury

By Lance Lysowski

The Buffalo News

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Sam Reinhart's status is uncertain for the Buffalo Sabres' back-to-back games this weekend.

Reinhart, a 25-year-old right wing, did not practice with the Sabres on Friday in KeyBank Center and is "day to day" with an upper-body injury, according to coach Ralph Krueger.

Reinhart scored the tying goal in the third period of a 3-2 overtime loss to the New York Rangers on Thursday night. He logged 19:41 of ice time and two shots on goal.

With Reinhart absent from practice, winger Tage Thompson filled in on the top line. Thompson, who has been a healthy scratch in four of the past five games, skated alongside Jack Eichel and Victor Olofsson, while Taylor Hall was with Eric Staal and Dylan Cozens

Reinhart, a four-time 20-goal scorer, has three goals and three assists through eight games this season.

Skinner knows it's hard to score goals in the NHL

By Paul Hamilton

WGR 550

January 29, 2021

Buffalo, NY (WGR 550) - The last time Jeff Skinner scored a goal was Feb. 29, 2020 in Arizona against the Coyotes. He has gone 11 games since without a goal, and only has three goals since December of 2019.

That covers a stretch of 38 games, yet, most fans blame head coach Ralph Krueger for Skinner's problems never holding the player accountable for his own play.

Last season, Skinner had more Grade-A scoring chances than any other Sabres player, yet, he could only score 14 goals in 59 games.

In his career, Skinner has had a 40-goal season, a 37-goal season and a 33-goal year. Over 82 games, he averages 29 goals.

Skinner didn't have Jack Eichel while with the Carolina Hurricanes and very rarely played with Eric Staal, yet, he averaged 29 goals per-season.

Last season, Skinner was at his best when he played with Johan Larsson, not Jack Eichel. This season, he's been with Curtis Lazar and Riley Sheahan and, again, gets more scoring chances than anybody else. The problem is simple - Skinner is not putting the puck in the net when he gets the opportunity.

In seven games, Skinner has no goals and one assist.

"Goal scorers will always be measured by the goals he scores, not the chances he creates," Krueger said following Friday's practice. "The chances he creates, leads to the goals he scored, so it's important that the chances are coming."

Quite a few fans want Krueger fired because of where he plays Skinner, despite the fact that Lazar's line is usually the second-best line on the team most nights.

"We need to have people lethal on different lines, and he can play up the lineup when he is scoring. He gives us that danger all the time," Krueger said.

"The line of Sheahan, Skinner and Lazar has been creating the opportunities, but haven't finished at the level that we need them to. Jeff's got to continue to create, and we all know he's a bunch scorer - when he gets one, he'll get many."

Skinner has been in this league long enough to know that things aren't always going to go his way.

"It's a tough league to score in," Skinner said after practice. "Other teams play well defensively, other goalies make nice stops, and I just have to keep working. You're going to go through stretches where things seem to be clicking, and you're going to go through stretches where it's a little more of a battle. You have to work through those times and we can do a lot more."

Skinner also doesn't mind playing on the line with Lazar and Sheahan.

"They're good guys, good teammates," he said. "I think we've had good games where we've generated a lot of opportunities offensively and at the same time, been pretty solid overall. They're two guys that play hard and are good in the faceoff circle, which allows us to play with the puck more."

Skinner averages almost 14 minutes of ice-time every game. The left winger was asked if he can get into the flow of a game at those minutes.

"When you talk about a flow or a rhythm, there's four lines and there's six [defensemen], and everyone has a role," Skinner said. "It's important with the opportunity you get, you play as hard as you can and compete, and work hard so you can help the team win."

Sam Reinhart missed practice on Friday, and Krueger called him day-to-day with an upper-body injury. His availability against the New Jersey Devils will be decided Saturday morning.

Henri Jokiharju returned to practice after missing two games with an upper-body injury. Krueger said things are looking good for all the defensemen to be available to play against the Devils.

Friday's Lines:

Forwards:

Olofsson - Eichel - Thompson

Hall - Staal - Cozens

Rieder - Eakin - Okposo

Skinner - Lazar - Sheahan

Defense:

McCabe - Ristolainen

Montour - Jokiharju

Dahlin - Miller

OPINION: Sabres were lucky to escape with a point against Rangers

By Paul Hamilton

WGR 550

January 29, 2021

Buffalo, NY (WGR 550) - This one is going to be real easy to analyze.

The good news is the Buffalo Sabres salvaged one point on Thursday against the New York Rangers to give them points in six of their last seven games. In that time, Buffalo is 3-1-2 and are now in fifth place in the East Division. That's one point out of a playoff spot, which is currently being held by the Pittsburgh Penguins.

That's all the good news I have for you.

The Sabres were badly out-played by a team that came into the game as the NHL's second-worst team with a .250 points percentage. The only reason the Sabres got into a position where Jack Eichel could make a blind, backhand pass that resulted in the overtime goal-against was the brilliance of Linus Ullmark.

Ullmark made 36 saves, including six on one power play in the third period, to, at least, get the Sabres to overtime. He made a great save on that man-advantage, flying across the crease to rob Mika Zibanejad and keep the score knotted at 2-2.

The Sabres spent most of the first 40 minutes in their own end, being out-shot 24-9. In the first period, the Sabres had poor puck management and bad decision making, they provided no support in any zone of the ice and were very slow to react. They were out-shot 15-5, yet, came out of the period tied at 1-1 thanks to Sam Reinhart waiting for Eichel to break free down the middle of the ice and laying a perfect pass on his stick for a backhand tap-in. That goal came with just 22 seconds left in the period.

Artemi Panarin was nowhere to be found in Tuesday's game, but he was much better on Thursday.

He got a puck to the right of Ullmark and all four Sabres just stood there and looked at him. Rasmus Ristolainen had no clue that Ryan Strome had snuck in behind him, and Panarin hit him for the goal.

Panarin gave the Rangers a 2-1 second period lead, but after Ryan Lindgren cross-checked Kyle Okposo into the end wall in the third period, Reinhart converted a perfect pass into the crease from Victor Olofsson and the Sabres got themselves into overtime.

Early in the overtime, Ristolainen took off on the left side and had a clean 2-on-1 with Eichel. As he went to pass the puck to Eichel, for what could've been an easy tap-in, the puck seemed to flip on him. The defenseman then panicked and tried to shoot, but all he did was lose control of the puck.

A few minutes later, Eichel turned the puck over to former Rochester Americans forward Colin Blackwell. He went in on Eichel 2-on-1, and fed 19-year-old Alexis Lafreniere for his first NHL goal in his seventh game. The 2020 first overall pick became the youngest player in NHL history to score an overtime winner for his first career goal.

Taylor Hall did get an assist on the Reinhart goal, but he just gets worse every game. His power play entries are horrendous as he gives the puck away every time he tries to enter the zone. He rarely has the puck on his stick, and hasn't scored a goal since opening night.

Ralph Krueger moved Hall to Eric Staal's left wing, but it didn't help.

Cody Eakin's line with Tobi Rieder and Kyle Okposo had a really rough night. It seemed like every time they got on the ice, they got bottled up in their own end and could never get the puck out.

I'm not going to take this any further other than to say the Sabres were utterly awful in this game. They got a point and pulled one point ahead of the New Jersey Devils in the East.

The Sabres have won just one-of-four games at home this season, going 1-2-1. Opportunity knocks once again on Saturday and Sunday afternoons when Lindy Ruff brings his Devils to town.

Ruff coached his 1,500th NHL game on Thursday. Ruff coached 1,165 games with Buffalo, 328 games with the Dallas Stars and seven games with the Devils.

With a regulation win on Saturday, the Sabres could open up a three-point lead on New Jersey. The Devils have lost three out of four games.

Sabres' Taylor Hall moves beside Eric Staal, happy with start: 'It's been good'

By Bill Hoppe

Olean Times Herald

January 29, 2021

BUFFALO – Taylor Hall's eight-game start with the Sabres looks a bit underwhelming.

The ultra-talented winger has recorded just one goal, a power-play score way back on opening night, and was moved to the second line Thursday. He has mustered just one assist in the last five games.

Of course, two weeks is a small sample size. Hall has registered seven points, so he has produced offense at a rate close to his career average entering the season (0.88 points per game this month versus 0.90).

Still, when Hall signed a one-year, \$8 million contract on Oct. 11, the expectation was he and Jack Eichel would morph into one of the NHL's best center-winger duos.

Now, Hall, 29, will likely skate at left wing beside center Eric Staal and rookie Dylan Cozens during Saturday afternoon's home game against the New Jersey Devils.

Hall, the 2017-18 Hart Trophy winner with New Jersey, hasn't faced his old team since he was traded to the Arizona Coyotes last season.

Coach Ralph Krueger shifted Hall beside Staal during Thursday's 3-2 overtime loss to the New York Rangers, a game in which the Sabres looked listless. Krueger also moved winger Victor Olofsson up with Eichel. He kept the lines intact for Friday's practice.

"We knew from the start here the lines would shuffle here and there depending on what the game asked for," Krueger said on Zoom call following Friday's practice at KeyBank Center. "The possibility of Jack and Taylor together or them apart is a different challenge for the opposition. Whether at home or on the road, we will be playing with that, so you have to also expect that flexibility and the mobility."

Not surprisingly, an opportunity to skate with the 6-foot-4, 195-pound Staal excites Hall. When Hall chose the Sabres, he knew he could play on a line beside him.

Staal, 36, has enjoyed a terrific 17-year career, winning the Stanley Cup in 2006 and scoring 438 goals. To Hall, Staal hasn't shown any signs of graying.

"He's still got it," Hall said. "He's big, he's lanky, he can move well out there and just a veteran guy that knows where to be. ... Whether I'm playing with Jack or Eric, that was my thought coming into this year. There are two really good centermen to play with here and that can create matchup problems."

Despite a shortened training camp that featured no exhibition games, Hall said adjusting to the Sabres hasn't been a difficult experience. He wanted to join them, in part, because he played under Krueger with the Edmonton Oilers.

Hall said most NHL teams showcase similar styles.

"Teams always want to play with speed," he said. "They want to play a puck-possession game. They want to play in your face defensively. I think more than anything it's been adjusting to different linemates or the overall atmosphere that we have here."

"I think it's been good. I thought my first six games for me personally were really solid. The last two have slipped a little bit, but I feel comfortable enough that I can get to my game and help our team as much as I can."

While Hall hasn't scored an even-strength goal – he has three assists – he has generated offense. His Corsi For – the percentage of shot attempts by his team while he's on the ice at even strength – is 57.9%, according to hockey-reference.com. That number ranks third among regular Sabres behind Eichel and winger Sam Reinhart.

Krueger said Hall has brought confidence and an "aura" with him.

"When he explodes here, he's going to be extremely lethal for us," Krueger said. "He's still, like all our new players ... processing some of the principles and driving to make them habits. We all kind of left the page at times yesterday.

"But he's working on it and I'm sure we'll have him playing his A game consistently here very soon, just because of the pro that he is."

Hall enjoyed his best days as a pro with the Devils for three and a half seasons. A dynamic 39-goal, 93-point campaign earned him the MVP award three years ago.

But injuries stymied Hall over the next two seasons, and with his contract expiring, the Devils traded him to the Coyotes on Dec. 16, 2019.

The Devils have undergone a major overhaul since that deal, hiring a new general manager, Tom Fitzgerald, and bringing in former Sabres coach Lindy Ruff, who coached his 1,500th NHL game Thursday.

"There's a lot of people that are not there anymore, but a lot of people who helped me reach another step in my career," Hall said. "Obviously winning MVP in '18 was probably the pinnacle of my career so far and I have a lot of people to thank for that. ...

"Unfortunately, my last two seasons weren't the way that I wanted to be. I had a really good start to '18-19 and got hurt, and then last year I was just coming back from an injury and I get traded 25 games in. A little bit of a tumultuous ending, but overall, I have great thoughts about New Jersey and my time there."

Sabres rookie Jack Quinn could be assigned to Amerks soon

By Bill Hoppe

Olean Times Herald

January 29, 2021

BUFFALO – Sabres rookie Jack Quinn, who's on the taxi squad, recently recovered from an upper-body injury and could be assigned to the Rochester Americans soon.

"He was on IR and we were working an upper-body injury there, not a very serious one, very minor," Sabres coach Ralph Krueger said on a Zoom call following this afternoon's practice at KeyBank Center. "So he hasn't been a part of the equation here. He's been in rehab skates and or with the taxi squad."

The Sabres drafted Quinn, 19, eighth overall last year. In a normal year, the winger would likely be playing with his junior team, the Ontario Hockey League's Ottawa 67s.

But the OHL season is on hold because of the COVID-19 pandemic, so Quinn has stayed in Buffalo and kept practicing. Junior-age players can play in the AHL because their leagues are paused right now.

The Amerks open their season Feb. 5.

"We're excited about getting Jack started and possibly seeing some games soon, if he's healthy, in Rochester," Krueger said. "It's been fantastic to have him here with us, he's still with us, and just a real treat whenever you get to speak to him.

"He's got the eyes wide open, he's taking on everything that's going on around him here and he's learning and growing just by being here."

Quinn scored 52 goals in 62 games with the 67s last season.

Sabres' Sam Reinhart questionable for Saturday's game

By Bill Hoppe

Olean Times Herald

January 29, 2021

BUFFALO – Sabres winger Sam Reinhart missed today's practice with an upper-body injury and is questionable for Saturday afternoon's game against the New Jersey Devils.

"We'll make that call tomorrow morning," Sabres coach Ralph Krueger said on a Zoom call following this afternoon's practice at KeyBank Center.

Krueger said Reinhart, who finished Thursday's 3-2 overtime loss to the New York Rangers, is day to day. Reinhart recorded a goal and two points Thursday.

Tage Thompson subbed for Reinhart at right wing this afternoon on the top line beside center Jack Eichel and Victor Olofsson.

In other injury news, Krueger said defenseman Henri Jokiharju should return Saturday after an upper-body injury sidelined him two games. Jokiharju practiced today beside Brandon Montour.

"Joki looks initially good," Krueger said. "We're testing him now, with the skate today. So that would make all the defensemen available is my first impression. But we'll confirm that tomorrow morning, too. ...

"But it looked really good today in practice. He looked fresh, and my feeling is he was pain-free there."

In other news, the Rochester Americans announced today they signed forward Remi Elie and defenseman Nicolas Welsh to one-year AHL contracts.

Elie, 25, has spent the last two seasons in the Sabres organization, playing 16 games with Buffalo in 2018-19 before joining the Amerks. Elie has scored 16 goals and 27 points in 59 games with Rochester.

The Sabres claimed Elie off waivers from the Dallas Stars in 2018.

Welsh, 23, played six games with Banska Bystrica HC 05 in the Slovakian League earlier this season. He attended rookie camp with the Sabres in 2018.

Taylor Hall opens up about time with New Jersey ahead of Saturday's game vs. Devils

By Adam Unger

WKBW

January 29, 2021

BUFFALO, N.Y. (WKBW) — Taylor Hall has found himself on not one, but two new teams since winning the Hart Memorial Trophy less than three years ago. Surely, Sabres fans aren't complaining. Hall's arrival was one of the biggest surprises of NHL free agency.

To find another Hart Trophy winner who's no longer with the team that he won the NHL's MVP award with, you have to go back to 2011 and Corey Perry's campaign with the Anaheim Ducks. So what exactly went wrong in New Jersey after Hall won the award in 2018?

"My last two seasons weren't the way I wanted to be," Hall said. "I had a great start to 2018-19, and then I got hurt."

He was still putting up more than a point per game before being placed on injured reserve in January 2019. Knee surgery put an end to his campaign, and the Devils were among the worst teams in the East without him.

In December 2019, Hall was shipped off to Arizona. At the time of the trade, he had scored six goals and added 19 assists in 30 games played.

"Last year was... just kind of coming back from an injury," Hall said. "So it was a little bit of a tumultuous ending."

Hall never got to play against the Devils after being traded to the Coyotes; his first chance will come on Saturday at KeyBank Center. But the former first overall pick doesn't really recognize his former team.

"Unfortunately a lot of the guys that I played with over the years aren't there anymore," Hall said. "They've had a lot of turnover on that team and there's a bright future ahead of them there."

His best year in New Jersey immortalized him. And even though the ending was rocky and Hall was coming off a season-ending injury, he sees only the good times when he looks back on his time with the Devils.

"A lot of people helped me reach another step in my career. Winning MVP in 2018 was probably the pinnacle of my career so far," Hall said. "I have nothing but great things to say about the area and the team."

Hall has a goal and six assists with the Sabres so far in 2021. Buffalo hosts the New Jersey Devils at 1:00 p.m. on both Saturday and Sunday.

Observations from the Sabres' first 8 games

By Jourdon LaBarber

Sabres.com

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The eight-game mark seems like an appropriate time to take a step back and look at the big picture in 2021.

The newly formed East Division features eight teams. The Sabres play each of them eight times through the condensed 56-game schedule. Buffalo has earned eight points so far, at 3-3-2.

You see where this is going. Here are eight observations from the Sabres' start.

1. Checking in at the top

Goals have come and gone for the dynamic duo of Jack Eichel and Taylor Hall. Eichel has consistently put up points - he leads the team with nine - but scored his first goal on Tuesday, in game No. 7. He followed up with a second against the Rangers on Thursday.

Hall posted six points through the first three games but only has one in five contests since. The constant for both players has been the chances. Hall has generated 30 scoring chances, according to Natural Stat Trick, good for 13th in the NHL. Eichel ranks 16th with 28.

"I think it's been good," Hall said. "I thought my first six games for me personally were really solid. The last two have slipped a little bit, but I feel comfortable enough that I can get to my game and help our team as much as I can."

In terms of his personality, Hall has come every bit as advertised. Assistant coach Don Granato referred to Hall as "the ultimate competitor," pointing to the forward's hunger to learn to play the middle on the power play after spending his career on the flanks.

"Taylor's just been an amazing acquisition as far as the experience and the whole aura that he brings with him, the confidence that he has," Sabres coach Ralph Krueger said. "But also at the same time, the competitive fire that he is and the hunger for him to be a part of a winning team here is very, very large, and you can feel that and he emulates that all the time.

"So, we're just excited to have him. He's a good teammate, he's easy to coach. When he explodes here, he's going to be extremely lethal for us. He's still, like all our new players, they're still processing some of the principles and driving to make them habits."

Something to watch in the coming games will be what mix strikes the best balance for the Sabres offensively, which could vary depending on whether the team is at home or on the road or what the situation calls for in-game. Hall practiced alongside Eric Staal and Dylan Cozens on Friday, a look Krueger went to during the second period against New York on Thursday.

Eichel centered a line with Victor Olofsson and Tage Thompson. Sam Reinhart missed the skate due to an upper-body injury and is considered day-to-day.

"Whether I'm playing with Jack or Eric, that was my thought coming into this year," Hall said. "There are two really good centermen to play with here and that can create matchup problems for other team. ... No matter where I'm playing I'm excited."

2. Evaluating the team at even strength

The Sabres have yet to establish consistent 5-on-5 scoring, tied for 17th with 12 goals. They have played .500 hockey in spite of that thanks to sound play systematically.

The loss to a desperate Rangers team on Thursday was an outlier. Since the third period of the opener against Washington, the Sabres had consistently outshot and outchanced opponents despite varying results. They entered Thursday ranked third in high-danger chance percentage (64.3) and fourth in expected goals percentage (57.4).

Even after being heavily outshot by the Rangers, the Sabres rank 13th entering play on Friday with a 52.08-percent share of shot attempts at 5-on-5.

The tenets of Buffalo's identity have been there - aggressive play in the neutral zone, quick puck movement, sound defensive tracking from the forwards. The next step might simply be a matter of bearing down on the chances that present themselves.

"You're gonna go through stretches in a season where things seem to be clicking and you're gonna go through stretches where it's a little more of a battle and you have to work through those times," said Jeff Skinner, who is searching for his first goal despite being tied for the team lead with 18 scoring chances at 5-on-5. "It seems like we're in one of those stretches right now."

3. "A trust in the process"

Buffalo won nine of its first 12 games last season. Then they lost 11 of 14 games in November and were never quite able to fully climb back into the playoff picture.

Krueger hopes that the early adversity this season actually benefits the team in the long run. The Sabres saw strong outings go unrewarded, both individually and as a team, during a 1-3-1 start. They've managed to stick to their game and work through it, now having earned points in fourth straight games.

"I really felt everything came way too easy for us early (last year)," Krueger said Thursday. "I was never extremely comfortable as a coach. I'm actually way more comfortable with this start and with all of the different challenges that we had to managed."

"... There is a trust in the process here, which is going through the group. We feel very comfortable with where we are right now. The bumps and bruises are always tests of your mettle and your character and the reactions, and the learning that's come through those has been deep."

4. Added depth from newcomers

Krueger explained how a revamped lineup has led to greater balance following the win over New York on Tuesday.

"For us, it was about building a balanced, competitive team," Krueger said. "We really felt on the defensive side we were weak last year. As an example, we might have had up to 10 players in a lineup at any given time where pretty well all 10 wanted to play the power play."

"Now we have real, clear role definition within the group and everybody embraces the role that they have, is proud of that, and carries it out with that kind of diligence, preparation. Tactically, we're a much stronger team at the moment just because of that depth."

Curtis Lazar may have been the team's foremost example of role acceptance last season, when he carved out a full-time role as a physical, checking centerman who could win key draws and also chip in on offense. He's brought that same energy this year to a line with Skinner and Riley Sheahan.

But it now goes beyond Lazar. Sheahan and Cody Eakin have become go-to players in the faceoff circle and on the penalty kill, while Sheahan has also flashed an ability to create around the net. Tobias Rieder was touted as a threat to score shorthanded, a trait he showed with his breakaway goal Tuesday.

The penalty kill now ranks 12th in the NHL with an 80-percent success rate after finishing 30th last season. All of these details have gone into the Sabres' ability to play at a .500 pace while they wait for the scoring to come.

5. The Staal effect

Staal let out an emphatic celebration after scoring a goal during practice on Friday, the kind of lighthearted energy fans first got a glimpse of when the veteran was mic'd up for a training camp scrimmage. (You can check that out below.)

Staal admitted the process of acclimating to a new team has taken time (although he does have four points through his first eight games). That said, the intangibles have been apparent from the start. His presence has given the Sabres a second power-play unit with the ability to score, a nod to both his skill and his ability to communicate with teammates.

It's no accident that Staal was situated next to first-round pick Dylan Cozens in the dressing room.

"Not only a great job communicating, but the messaging is great as well," assistant coach Don Granato said. "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."

6. Cozens' unique quality

It's common for young, highly skilled forwards to have an uphill climb as they adjust to the defensive responsibilities of the NHL. With Cozens, the inverse has been true.

Krueger has said often that the Sabres have been pleasantly surprised with how Cozens has embraced the game away from the puck. With that in check, the 19-year-old can focus on offensive detail and finding ways for his top-end talent to translate into points.

"I know that's the way I'm gonna stick in this lineup is if I'm good defensively," Cozens said. "If I'm good offensively but not defensively, I know I'm gonna be out. So, that's the biggest thing is just focusing on defense first. Good offense comes from good defense."

7. Settling down in net

The Sabres have already dealt with their share of adversity in net. Linus Ullmark missed a pair of games after learning his father had passed away in Sweden. Carter Hutton missed the next road trip in Washington after taking an elbow to the head.

Both goaltenders are now active and ready to play with back-to-back games coming this weekend against New Jersey. Ullmark turned in a highlight-laden, 36-save effort on Thursday to improve to 2-1-2 with a .915 save percentage. Hutton had stopped 40 of 42 shots in two games against the Flyers prior to his injury.

Even when the team does play back-to-back, Krueger has reiterated that decisions in net will be made on a daily basis.

"We're gonna be really making that call on a need-for-that-day basis, on our gut, what it's telling us and what the sports science is telling us and so on," he said.

8. The new normal

The first eight games provided early answers to the questions wrought by the COVID-19 pandemic. How would teams utilize the taxi squad? What effect would the condensed schedule have? Would intra-division play breed new rivalries?

In Buffalo's case, the taxi squad has served as an extension of the active roster. It travels with the team and often practices with it, too. Most of the taxi-squad players are able to move back and forth without clearing waivers, making the situation ever more fluid (the exception is defenseman Brandon Davidson).

The Sabres have shown a willingness to rest young players in an effort to keep them fresh, with Cozens and Tage Thompson both having received rest days. When Cozens rested, Casey Mittelstadt stepped right in both on the second line and the second power-play unit.

As for recurring opponents, time will tell whether the seeds planted during early-season series sprout into rivalries when the Sabres meet teams like Washington and Philadelphia again. Tactical adjustments will be another storyline to watch for.

"We spoke about it as a team today," Krueger said Friday. "There's a lot of opportunity for instant adjustments within games and you try to find ways, especially on the specialty teams, to bring some surprise. The 5-on-5 game, what happens here is we're just going to get know each other so well."

"Every single team brings a different personality. It does remind me a lot of my world championship or Olympic past where you're playing the same countries over and over again but they are completely different in their character, makeup, and tendencies. We're seeing that in our division and it's actually a lot of fun."