



Buffalo Sabres

Daily Press Clips

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Eichel scores in shootout, Sabres beat Devils 4-3

By Johan Bronstein

Associated Press

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BUFFALO, N.Y. (AP) — Jack Eichel scored in a shootout, Linus Ullmark made 31 saves and the Buffalo Sabres beat the New Jersey Devils 4-3 on Saturday.

Victor Olofsson, Tobias Rieder and Eric Staal also scored to help the Sabres improve to 3-0-2 in their past five games. Taylor Hall had two assists.

In the first of eight meetings this season between the East Division teams, Sabres coach Ralph Krueger was pleased to see his team respond after twice fall behind by a goal and squandering a one-goal lead in the third period.

"We're much, much calmer than last season with going up, going down, tied games," Krueger said. "It's good we have this adversity early already. It's making us more resilient for these kind of games and understanding that it's going to be like this every day."

Stall said that ability is the sign of a good team.

"When you're not at your best, you're still picking up points in the column," he said.

Janne Kuokkanen, Ty Smith and Andreas Johnsson scored for New Jersey in former Sabres coach Lindy Ruff's first trip to Buffalo since taking over the Devils this offseason. Scott Wedgewood stopped 28 shots.

The teams meet again in Buffalo on Sunday.

Eichel returned to the game in the third period after taking a puck to the mouth and briefly leaving for the dressing room. He scored in the first round of the shootout, ringing a shot from the left slot in off the far post.

Ullmark stopped all three shots he faced in the shootout. Ullmark is now 6-3 with 30 saves on 33 shots faced in shootouts, and his .857 career shootout save percentage ranks second all-time and first among active goaltenders that have faced at least 20 shots.

Kuokkanen scored his first NHL goal for the Devils to tie the score at 3 with a little more than nine minutes left in the third period.

"We've been struggling lately with scoring, so I am really happy that I was able to help the team," Kuokkanen said. "But after the game, I'm not too happy about it because it wasn't enough."

Kuokkanen jammed the puck inside the near post from just outside the crease after receiving a pass from Michael McLeod.

Olofsson's power-play goal gave Buffalo a 3-2 lead about midway through the third. Rasmus Dahlin set up Olofsson for a rising wrist shot from the right circle.

Rieder scored a tying goal for Buffalo 41 seconds after Johnsson gave New Jersey a 2-1 lead in the opening minutes of the third period. Cody Eakin created the scoring chance by battling behind the net for the puck and leaving a backhand pass in the left circle for Rieder,

Devils rookie center Jack Hughes tallied his team-leading eighth point of the season when he set up Johnsson for a rising wrist shot from the left circle.

Smith's power-play goal late in the second period tied it at 1-1. With Stall serving a penalty for hooking in the offensive zone, Smith received a pass from P.K. Subban just inside the blue line and beat Ullmark with a straightaway slap shot.

"We generated a lot of high-quality opportunities," Ruff said. "The common theme through these first games has been we've missed too many good opportunities."

Among those missed chances was the Devils failing to put a shot on goal during a five-on-three power play in the first period against the Sabres.

"If we ever get those five-on-threes again," Devils forward Damon Severson said, "it'll be huge for us to score on them."

Staal gave the Sabres a 1-0 lead midway through the second period when he scored on a wrist shot from the high slot.

MISSING PIECES

New Jersey center Travis Zajac did not travel to Buffalo for the weekend series after entering the league's COVID-19 protocol on Friday. The Devils called up Nicholas Merkley from the taxi squad to replace Zajac in the lineup.

Buffalo forward Sam Reinhart is day-to-day with an upper-body injury and snapped a streak of 246 consecutive games played. Tage Thompson took Reinhart's place in the Sabres lineup.

RENEWED ACQUAINTANCE

Sabres forward Taylor Hall played against his former team for the first time since the Devils traded him to Arizona on Dec. 16, 2019. Buffalo's top free-agent acquisition assisted on two goals, tying Eichel for the team lead with nine points in eight games.

RUFF'S RETURN

Ruff served as a Rangers assistant and Stars head coach since being fired by the Sabres in 2013. He coached the Sabres for 16 seasons following a nine-year playing career in Buffalo.

Inside the NHL: The multigame series is a fun part of this new schedule

By Mike Harrington

The Buffalo News

January 31, 2021

It's early and there's going to be a lot more data to gather, but I love large parts of this made-for-Covid NHL schedule.

I hate only playing seven teams, but that's obviously in deference to the virus and it's a virtual certainty that won't be part of things in 2021-22. But more back-to-backs are good and the concept of a two-game series in the same city should 100% be continued going forward.

But there will be opposition. Count Washington defenseman John Carlson as a traditionalist and a no vote.

"Absolutely not. I would never vote for something like this," Carlson said last week. "I like it how it was."

Sabres forward Taylor Hall said the Sabres' easy travel – never leaving the Eastern time zone – reminds him of what he had the last few years with New Jersey.

"I had an inkling we'd be playing teams pretty close to us," Hall said, referring to the NHL's 2021 realignment. "The prospect of not having to travel all that much is always nice. Our travel in New Jersey was so awesome. We took a bus to three different teams (New York, Long Island and Philadelphia) and it really allowed us to recover and make the season a little bit better."

The constant in-and-out of one-offs from city to city is arduous, particularly for teams in the Western Conference. This kind of schedule, which allows teams to set down roots in a city for multiple games, was championed early last season by Chicago captain Jonathan Toews in an article by veteran Hawks beat writer Mark Lazerus in *The Athletic*.

Hundreds get vaccinated overnight in Seattle after freezer failure, avoiding expiration of doses
At the time, Toews and Lazerus were spitballing ideas to cut down on flights, on time spent in the air and on middle-of-the-night returns home. It seemed like something the league would never do. Until Covid came along.

There are admittedly issues. The Canadian and West divisions this year are too spread out, but border issues prevented any other way of doing things. Ottawa spent a too-long total of six days in Vancouver last week playing three games (and lost them all), but you're never going to have cross-country division rivals after this year. And I'm not big on the Sabres' two-city, three-game set against New Jersey in April.

But there's no reason under a normal divisional alignment the Sabres couldn't play their two games in, say, Carolina on a back-to-back and not have to travel there twice. And in the wake of all the lost revenue this year, the savings in travel could really add up.

Competitively, the lack of back-to-backs against the same team had been a negative in recent years. You might have only had one or two for an entire season. The Sabres have 25 this year. It's going to create animosity, which creates more competitive hockey. Imagine dealing with pests such as Calgary's Matthew Tkachuk and Boston's Brad Marchand in consecutive games.

Everything in this season is odd, but everything should be evaluated closely to see what can be kept going forward. Here's hoping the league learns from this schedule and keeps some of its key nuances. More back-to-backs, please.

What about Botterill for Pens?

Former Sabres General Manager Jason Botterill was a visitor to the KeyBank Center press box for Tuesday's game against the New York Rangers and politely declined comment when this corner greeted him.

Now the assistant GM for the expansion Seattle Kraken, Botterill's scouting territory includes the Sabres as well as Pittsburgh and Columbus. The expansion draft to stock the Kraken is scheduled for July 21.

It's fair to wonder about Botterill's status with the Kraken, however, in the wake of the sudden resignation of Pittsburgh GM Jim Rutherford on Wednesday. Botterill, of course, was part of three Stanley Cup teams with the Penguins and was Rutherford's assistant for the last two. He's a beloved figure among the Penguins administration, notably owner Mario Lemieux, and is popular among the Pittsburgh media as well.

And while Botterill's teams underachieved when he was the GM here, he's still well-regarded around the league and it's easy to find many people in the game who blame owners Terry and Kim Pegula for the franchise's issues as much as the former GM.

Whether it's with the Penguins or another team down the road, it would be no shock to see Botterill get another run as an NHL GM.

Fans have Lafreniere's back

Alexis Lafreniere was here last week for two games. Played 14:58 on Tuesday night and was a ghost, like most of his team. The No. 1 overall pick played 15:27 on Thursday and was much better, even before his game-winning goal in overtime.

Rangers fans didn't take too kindly, to say the least, to this corner pointing out on Twitter during the second period that the kid didn't have a point in his first 6½ games. And they erupted after the overtime goal as if I had written the comment after the game. Real-time commentary is apparently too deep a concept for people.

Memo to Blueshirt bleeders: The No. 1 overall pick is going to be talked about more than the fourth-line center. And by more than just people in the Big Apple. That's how it works. Get used to it.

It was reminiscent of all the blowback sent this way in the Mets-Bisons days, when only New York folk could criticize the Amazins and someone in Buffalo couldn't, even though they put an 87-loss team here in their first season as the parent club.

As for Lafreniere, coach David Quinn said his mega-rookie's game had been progressing even without numbers.

"He's had a lot of fun with the fact that he's been snakebit. He probably should have had four goals tonight," Quinn said. "But for him to get his first in that moment, in that situation and under those circumstances, I couldn't be happier for him. His game was coming, he was playing better and better each night, so it's just great to see this."

"For sure it is [a weight off my shoulders]," Lafreniere said. "I saw the puck go in and all the boys jumping on the ice. It was a pretty special moment."

MSG needs to stop that

The ads on helmets don't bother me as much as I thought they might. Companies with a distinctive logo make for a better look. The Sabres' home helmets have the iconic key from KeyBank. The road ones have the wordy Roswell Park logo and on quick TV glances, nobody knows what is being advertised.

The virtual, TV-only ads on the ice inside the blue line and on the glass behind the net don't bother me, either.

The major annoyance early on: The Sabres' MSG broadcasts shrinking the screen – during game action – a few times a period to highlight what sponsor is marked for that segment of the action.

Just stop that, MSG. Stop. I repeat: Stop it.

Show your ad highlight before a faceoff or during any other break in play. In or out of a commercial. Stop moving the screen during the game. A bad idea that should end yesterday.

Around the boards

- Nine top-5 picks played in the two Sabres-Rangers games last week, including three No. 1 overalls – Hall (2010), Rasmus Dahlin (2018) and Lafreniere (2020). There were also four No. 2 overalls in Eric Staal (2003),

Sam Reinhart (2014), Jack Eichel (2015) and Kaapo Kakko (2019). Also taken in the top 5 were well-traveled Rangers defenseman Jack Johnson (2005, No. 3) and center Ryan Strome (2011, No. 5).

- Mark Messier turned 60 on Jan. 18. Wayne Gretzky turned 60 on Tuesday. Gilbert Perreault turned 70 on Nov. 13. The seasons sure roll on fast.

- The St. Louis Blues will become the fourth NHL team to allow fans into their home arena for games as up to 1,400 will be in Enterprise Center starting Tuesday night. The Blues join Dallas, Arizona and Florida in allowing spectators at this point.

- Just like in the NHL, the AHL will have a Canadian division when the season opens Friday night. It looks like all those games will be in NHL arenas. Stockton (Calif.) received a provisional relocation approval to play its home games in Calgary at the Saddledome. The Heat are expected to join the Belleville Senators (Ottawa), Laval Rocket (Montreal), Manitoba Moose (Winnipeg) and Toronto Marlies (Toronto) as teams playing games in the rink of their NHL affiliate.

- Interviewing is ruined by video conferences and it's such an important skill for media. One of the best ever at the give-and-take was talk show icon Larry King, gone last weekend at 87. So many of us need to work harder to follow King's credo: Short questions get long answers. RIP to a master at it. RIP to our interviews as long as we're on video conferences.

Mike Harrington: Even as they struggle, Sabres finding the way to scoop up points

Mike Harrington
The Buffalo News
January 30, 2021

It's just plain weird in KeyBank Center this season without all of you. But there are days like Saturday where I'm darn glad you didn't pay to get in and I got paid to watch.

Because if you handed over your money and I didn't get mine, we'd all have been wasting our time for at least two periods of that game between the Sabres and New Jersey Devils. What a nothing-going-on snoozer.

At least things got a lot more interesting in the third period, overtime and shootout of Buffalo's 4-3 win over the Lindy Ruff-led Devils (and yes, that feels goofy to write).

The Sabres are finding a way. They have points in six of their last seven games (4-1-2) and in five straight. This 3-0-2 run, in fact, matches one of similar makeup as their longest in nearly 14 months.

Still, you see trouble spots.

For one thing, it's pretty easy to ask where did the team go that was playing well and piling up shot totals against Washington and Philadelphia? Because that group hasn't been around this week for most of the last three games against New York and New Jersey, two teams on a decidedly lower level who are plus-23 in shots on the Sabres over these trio of matchups.

"Not every game can be perfect," said winger Tobias Rieder, whose three goals are already just one fewer than he had over the last two years in Edmonton and Calgary. "There's absolutely going to be games where you're not playing to your ability and if you get points out of those games, they can be huge in the long run."

Five-on-five play is spotty. Tage Thompson is playing like he has no clue what to do on his line and it's hard to imagine what he was doing on the power play Saturday. If Sam Reinhart can't play Sunday, the Sabres would be much better off with Casey Mittelstadt in the lineup than Thompson.

Goal scoring remains an issue. Victor Olofsson has four, while Reinhart, Tobias Rieder and Eric Staal have three apiece. That's good. Jack Eichel, Taylor Hall, Kyle Okposo and Jeff Skinner – who combine for \$33 million in salaries – have combined for three. That simply can't continue.

At least Eichel has a pair of shootout winners and Hall has a team-high eight assists. Still, Hall needs to be a lot more noticeable in games than he has been. That Hart Trophy looks a lot longer than just three years ago.

The Sabres have done nothing to date to allow them to think they can play down to opposition. Let's not forget that the Rangers and Devils are looking at Buffalo as opportunity, too.

Coach Ralph Krueger's relentless optimism is admirable but hard to accept. Still, he likes the way his team is embracing tight games. Six of the Sabres' first nine have been decided by a goal and they've gone 3-1-2 in them. There are going to be a lot more.

"This division is going to be all about that for 56 league games," Krueger said. "And it's going to make our division extremely exciting to watch. Great for our fans, but challenging for us every single night, all these teams with a different personality."

Linus Ullmark still has a penchant for giving up goofy goals, with Janne Kuokkanen's tying tally with 5:19 left in regulation not a good display because Ullmark pulled off his post early. But Ullmark has been the anti-Robin Lehner in shootouts, stopping nine of 10 attempts in his three outings. He went 3 for 3 Saturday and is 30 for 35 for his career. That .857 save percentage, in fact, is second all-time in the shootout era (since 2005) among goalies with at least 20 attempts to former Tampa Bay goalie Johan Holmqvist (32-37, .865).

The Sabres have a lot more faith in their goalies than in the past. Ullmark has been strong over the last five starts while Carter Hutton, who should be in goal in Sunday's rematch, had put together two games at a .952 clip until taking the cheap elbow to the head from Philadelphia's Ivan Provorov on Martin Luther King Jr. Day.

The penalty kill, an Achilles heel last year, is running at 80% after going 4 for 5 Saturday. One chance was a full two minutes of 5-on-3 after rarely called simultaneous penalties on Staal and Brandon Montour. The Devils passed and passed and passed but Curtis Lazar, Rasmus Ristolainen, Jake McCabe and Ullmark didn't blink.

"It was perfectly positioned if you look at how Lazar, McCabe and Ristolainen took the shot lanes away," Krueger said. "And how well they anticipated and read their movements. It was a textbook three on five. ... That was truly a moment where we were tested and you almost feel like you scored a goal when the guys kill like that."

The Sabres have to start getting a move-on in these games. They've only scored first three times and led after two periods twice. They've only had command of one game, the 6-1 grounding of the Flyers in Philadelphia. The Devils are playing without center Travis Zajac and goalie Mackenzie Blackwood (Covid-19 list) and center Nico Hischier, the No. 1 pick from 2017 who has been sidelined all season with a leg issue.

They play hard, like you would expect out of a Ruff team, but they're not very good and using former Sabres farmhand Scott Wedgewood in goal. The Sabres need to flat-out put one on the Devils in the rematch Sunday.

"I think we're still taking steps," said Staal. "There's parts of our game that are solid, and there's parts of it to work on. But I think that goes for a lot of teams. Obviously, the two points are huge and that's what matters. And now we need to follow it up with a new one tomorrow."

Jack Eichel's shootout goal sends Sabres to victory with Sam Reinhart out

By Lance Lysowski

The Buffalo News

January 30, 2021

Ralph Krueger had seen enough.

With the score tied Saturday afternoon in KeyBank Center, and Tage Thompson unable to use his blend of size and speed to make an impact on the Buffalo Sabres' top line, Krueger reunited Jack Eichel with Jeff Skinner to try to earn two points against the New Jersey Devils.

Krueger and the Sabres accomplished that goal, as Eichel's low shot in the first shootout round sent Buffalo to a 4-3 victory over the Devils. The Sabres (4-3-2) have earned points in six of their last seven games, including five straight.

Krueger's Plan B didn't lead to the victory, though. Skinner, Eichel and Victor Olofsson skated together for less than four minutes at 5-on-5 because the Sabres' captain missed more than half of the third period after getting hit in the face with a puck.

Though the roster is unquestionably more talented than a year ago, Krueger is still discovering how to build a lineup that will produce consistently at 5-on-5. The challenge increased in difficulty with the absence of Sam Reinhart, a four-time 20-goal scorer whose 246-game iron-man streak ended because of an upper-body injury.

"Finding people that can go along with Jack is always a challenge because of his level and speed and how he thinks and sees the game," said Krueger. "With Sam out of the lineup, he's a difficult player to replace. He's the twin, really, of Jack since I've been here, and we had a few guys chip in like Skinner, Thompson early. They did a good job of filling those shoes because Sam's shoes are very big to fill."

Krueger knows Taylor Hall can skate with Eichel. Hall, a former Hart Trophy winner, was on Eichel's left wing for each of the first eight games this season. However, the Sabres' offense has failed to produce at even strength and Reinhart's absence forced Krueger to get creative.

Thompson, who started the season on the top line, did not appear ready for the assignment after he was a healthy scratch in four of the previous five games. The 23-year-old winger was on the ice for a team-low 11:44 on Saturday. Olofsson, meanwhile, began on the left wing and switched to the right side when Skinner was elevated to the line.

The change occurred after an ugly stretch of play spoiled an encouraging start to the second period.

Eric Staal, a 36-year-old center, benefited from Hall's presence. When two Devils defenders swarmed Hall after he collected a pass near the right wall, he passed to the high slot, where Staal uncorked a shot that went off the post and in for a 1-0 lead at 9:03 into the second period.

Staal has points in four of his last five games, including three goals during that span. He has skated with five different linemates this season, including Hall and Dylan Cozens on Saturday.

"Definitely the confidence is continuing to grow and get better every day within our structure and the type of game that I can play," said Staal. "I think the body has felt good. I think today was one of the better games I've felt, as far as physically goes, but when you're out there with a guy like Taylor Hall, he draws so much attention to him. He can really drive the puck up the ice and you've got to make sure you're in the right spots and help out as much as you can. ... We've got some guys on this team that can make plays offensively. Whoever I'm out there with, try to do my best to contribute."

The Devils answered with defenseman Ty Smith scoring a power-play goal on a shot from the point at 18:35 into the second period. New Jersey then captured its first lead of the game at 1:24 into the third, as Andreas Johnsson's shot from the left circle went over Linus Ullmark's glove and into the net.

In past years, an unproductive top line spelled doom for the Sabres. Their offseason additions, though, have been productive when Eichel and company aren't scoring.

Forty-one seconds following Johnsson's goal, Sabres winger Tobias Rieder tied the score, 2-2, with a shot from the left circle that beat Devils goalie Scott Wedgewood at the far post. Moments later, Eichel quickly skated to the bench after taking a puck to the face and did not return for 12:56.

With Eichel receiving treatment, Krueger cobbled together a top power-play unit that featured Curtis Lazar, typically a penalty-killer, and Rasmus Ristolainen. A simple approach produced a goal, as Olofsson's snapshot from the right circle gave the Sabres a 3-2 lead at 10:56 into the third period.

Olofsson, who spent most of last season at left wing, noted that recent lineup juggling has made him comfortable playing either side at 5-on-5.

"I'm kind of used to it now as well," said Olofsson. "I've been going both left and right win here lately. I feel comfortable on both sides. We've been changing a lot on the forward lines, so it's kind of natural right now."

Eichel returned in time to watch from the bench as the Devils tied the score, 3-3, with Janne Kuokkanen jamming a rebound over the goal line with 5:19 remaining in regulation. Krueger then went back to a top line featuring Skinner, who scored most of his career-high 40 goals in 2018-19 while skating on Eichel's left wing. The trio produced three shot attempts in 3:42 before overtime.

"It was just something I wanted to look at," said Krueger of Skinner, who had two shots on goal in 15:05. "I thought Jeff was having a good game and you know we're quick, even in tie games, at doing things to win. We're all about trying to get the W no matter what, even in regular time. We don't sit back and are happy with ties or points that way. ... I thought Jeff earned that opportunity."

The Sabres have scored only four even-strength goals over their past four games and continue to rely heavily on Ullmark, who made 31 saves in regulation and overtime before stopping three shootout breakaways to secure the win. It's unclear if Reinhart will be available against the Devils on Sunday, but the ugly performance that led to lineup changes did not tarnish the win in Krueger's eyes.

"Again, we found a way to win and our specialty teams chipped in, but the character, above all, definitely got us this win today," said Krueger.

Wraparound: Jack Eichel, Linus Ullmark send Sabres to shootout win

By Lance Lysowski

The Buffalo News

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The Buffalo Sabres didn't overthink their power-play strategy with Jack Eichel receiving treatment after the 24-year-old captain was struck in the face by a puck.

Without their top player on the ice, the Sabres simply gave Victor Olofsson the puck in the spot where he scored most of his 20 goals as a rookie last season, and the 25-year-old winger delivered the go-ahead goal in the third period Saturday.

Eichel returned to the bench just in time to watch the New Jersey Devils tie the score. He then helped the Sabres secure two points.

Following an overtime in which the Devils' Jack Hughes hit the post, Eichel scored in the shootout to help Buffalo defeat New Jersey, 4-3, inside KeyBank Center.

The Sabres (4-3-2) have earned points in six of their last seven games, and the Devils (3-3-2), now coached by Lindy Ruff, entered Saturday with three losses in their previous four games.

Olofsson's power-play goal from the right circle with 9:04 remaining gave the Sabres a 3-2 lead after Eichel left for the dressing room, and the Devils tied the score again when Janne Kuokkanen capitalized on a bouncing puck near Buffalo's net. Eichel missed almost 13 minutes after taking a puck to the face.

Eric Staal and Tobias Rieder also had goals for the Sabres, and Linus Ullmark make 31 saves while making his fifth consecutive start in net. Ullmark stopped all three shots he faced in the shootout.

Better start: The Sabres had five shots on goal through the first 8:16 of the first period and controlled possession, yet they couldn't generate quality chances against Devils goalie Scott Wedgewood, who played for the Rochester Americans in 2018-19.

Power-play adjustment: With Sam Reinhart out, Dylan Cozens moved to the top power-play unit and assumed Taylor Hall's position in the slot. However, the Sabres appeared disconnected in their first opportunity on the man-advantage, generating only two shots on goal. Cozens was eventually replaced on the top unit by Rasmus Ristolainen.

Special teams: Buffalo was forced to kill a 5-on-3 when Eric Staal and Brandon Montour were penalized during the same sequence. Ristolainen, Curtis Lazar and Jake McCabe were on the ice for 1:43 of the penalty kill, helping the Sabres not allow a shot on goal on the Devils' two-man advantage.

Momentum shift: Turnovers caused the Sabres to go 10:06 without a shot on goal in the first period. Buffalo benefited from winning 65% of the faceoffs in the first 20 minutes and outshot New Jersey, 7-6, during that span.

Opening salvo: Staal gave the Sabres a 1-0 lead at 9:03 into the second period with a shot from the slot that went off the post and in for his third goal of the season. Hall, who was playing the Devils for the first time since he was traded by New Jersey in December 2019, earned the primary assist with his pass from near the right wall.

Staal has points in four of his last five games, including three goals. His 439th career goal puts him ahead of Gary Roberts on the NHL's all-time list. Staal trails only Alex Ovechkin, Patrick Marleau and Sidney Crosby among active players.

Slump ends: New Jersey was amid a 1-for-11 skid on the power play when Smith scored on the man advantage with a shot from the point, tying the score 1-1 at 18:35 into the second period.

High shot: Andreas Johnsson gave the Devils a 2-1 lead at 1:37 in the third period on a shot from the left circle that went over Ullmark's glove and into the net.

Quick strike: Rieder tied the score at 2:18 into the third period on a low shot from the left circle that beat Wedgewood at the far post.

Matinee magic: Under Krueger, the Sabres entered Saturday with a 7-2-2 record in afternoon games since the start of the 2019-20 season.

Iron man: Reinhart (upper body) missed his first game for the Sabres since March 28, 2017, an iron-man streak of 246 consecutive games played. Since the start of the 2017-18 season, Reinhart has totaled 51 goals at 5-on-5.

Reunion: Former Rochester Americans coach Chris Taylor is now an assistant on Lindy Ruff's staff with the Devils. Taylor, who was among the 22 hockey operations employees dismissed by the Sabres in June, led the Amerks to a combined 116-65-33 record across three seasons.

Lineup: Defenseman Henri Jokiharju returned to the lineup after missing consecutive games with an undisclosed injury. Matt Irwin, who replaced Jokiharju on the blue line, was a healthy scratch for the seventh time this season.

Next: The Sabres complete third set of back-to-backs with a game at 1 p.m. Sunday against the Devils.

Sam Reinhart to miss Sabres' game against Devils with upper-body injury

By Lance Lysowski

The Buffalo News

January 30, 2021

Sam Reinhart won't be in the Buffalo Sabres' lineup Saturday against the New Jersey Devils.

Sabres coach Ralph Krueger told reporters before puck drop against the Devils that Reinhart, a 25-year-old right wing, will miss at least one game with an upper-body injury. With Reinhart out, winger Tage Thompson is expected to skate on the top line with Jack Eichel and Victor Olofsson.

Linus Ullmark will start a fifth consecutive game in goal for Buffalo.

"Like with anybody that comes into our style of play, it's the responsibility everybody must carry away from the puck and he has been a student over the last few games and in between," said Krueger of Thompson. "We spent time with him on that part of the game and the physicality that's needed and the positional play that we expect.

"He was out of hockey for longer than anybody here on the roster, so for him to get up to speed on all of these things is going to take a little bit more time. But it's really on that side of the puck. We'd like to see puck possession. He's so good technically. Very good skill-wise and we want to see him in those scoring areas and use his body to create."

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, but he did not practice Friday with the Sabres.

Thompson has been a healthy scratch in four of the past five games, but he started the season on the Sabres' top line with Eichel and Taylor Hall. Krueger, though, has moved Hall to a line with Eric Staal and Dylan Cozens.

Thompson, 23, went 14 months between NHL games because he suffered a season-ending injury in November 2019. He has one assist and a minus-2 rating while averaging 14:41 of ice time in four games this season.

Reinhart, a four-time 20-goal scorer, has three goals and three assists through eight games this season. He has not missed a game since the 2016-17 season.

OPINION: Three observations: Sabres allow Devils to hang around, must settle the score in overtime again

By T.J. Luckman

WGR 550

January 30, 2021

The Buffalo Sabres, once again, could not settle things in regulation, as the New Jersey Devils came to KeyBank Center on Saturday afternoon and hung around long enough for each team to get a point.

However, the Sabres did close things out with a 4-3 shootout win, thanks to a Jack Eichel goal in the opening round, as well as another stellar performance from Linus Ullmark in net.

Let's take a look at three observations from this afternoon's game:

1.) Four of the last five games have gone to overtime

The Sabres are struggling to close games out in regulation these days. Four of their last five games have gone to overtime, with three of those games going to a shootout.

Saturday saw the Sabres holding on to a one-goal lead in the third period for nearly three minutes before the Devils answered to tie things up at 3-3 with just over six minutes to play in regulation.

Buffalo is going to need to figure out how to start closing things down in 60 minutes or less. The Sabres cannot keep allowing more points to their divisional opponents in a shortened season. It could make things a bit uncomfortable when the end-of-season playoff push comes.

It's going to come sooner than we think.

2.) Sabres taking too many penalties the last two games

Through the first eight games of the year, the Sabres led the league in penalty differential, with a 1.83 ratio per-60 minutes in favor of drawing penalties to taking penalties. Through the past two games, the Sabres have drawn nine penalties and taken eight, a significantly lower rate than that of the start of the season.

With the Sabres producing on the power play (they're 2-for-9 in their last two games and 10-for-35 on the year), they will need to rely more on staying out of the box and drawing more penalties against their opponents to give themselves an edge in games where they seem to be struggling at finishing 5-on-5.

3.) Eric Staal continues to be a stabilizing presence

The Sabres have been in desperate need for another productive center for some time, and their trade for Eric Staal seems to have provided exactly what they were looking for out of the position. Staal has scored three goals and registered five points in nine games this season, and seems to have some chemistry with his new linemate, Taylor Hall. Hall assisted on Staal's goal on Saturday, along with defenseman Brandon Montour.

Sabres get back in the win column against Devils

By Kyle Powell

WGR 550

January 30, 2021

The Buffalo Sabres took care of business on Saturday afternoon, beating the visiting New Jersey Devils by way of a 4-3 score in a shootout at KeyBank Center.

After the first period saw zero goals scored, the Sabres broke the scoreless tie about nine minutes into the second. Eric Staal's third goal of the season gave the veteran forward points in four of his last five games.

The Devils tied things back up before the end of the period, though, as they cashed in on a power play opportunity with Staal sitting in the penalty box. Defenseman Ty Smith's point shot got past Linus Ullmark and evened the score 1-1 as the teams readied for the third period.

New Jersey then doubled up and tallied another goal to start the third period. Off a feed from Jack Hughes, winger Andreas Johnsson sniped the top-right corner of the net against Ullmark, making it a 2-1 contest.

As quickly as the Devils seemingly snatched all the momentum, Buffalo seized some right back 41 seconds later. After Johnsson got the go-ahead score for New Jersey, Tobias Rieder found pay dirt for the Sabres from the left faceoff circle.

The back-and-forth affair tumbled back Buffalo's way, as it was their turn to string consecutive goals together. Later in the period with New Jersey's Smith in the box for hooking, Victor Olofsson got some time and space on his off-wing and fired a shot over the glove of a screened Scott Wedgewood in net.

The Devils did not go away, though, as less than four minutes later, Janne Kuokkanen stuffed a puck between the left post and Ullmark's right pad to tie the game at 3-3. It was also his first goal in the NHL.

Kuokkanen's goal was the last of its kind in regulation, as the teams needed more time to decide this game. However, the extra five minutes settled nothing either, so the game headed to a shootout.

The only skater to score in the shootout was Sabres captain Jack Eichel, who rang his shot off the inside of the goal post and in to open the first round.

While Rasmus Dahlin and Victor Olofsson did not score for Buffalo, New Jersey failed to get goals from Jesper Bratt, Nikita Gusev or Kyle Palmieri as Linus Ullmark turned away all three shooters.

Minutes, stature grow as Jeff Skinner plays on top line for Buffalo Sabres

By John Vogl

The Athletic

January 30, 2021

BUFFALO, N.Y. — Jeff Skinner barely broke a sweat through two periods Saturday. The only three people in Sabres jerseys who skated less were his linemates, Riley Sheahan and Curtis Lazar, and Sabretooth, the mascot waving a flag in the stands.

But Skinner's pulse quickened a couple of times. On the last shift of the first period and during a late one in the second, Skinner looked to his right and saw Jack Eichel as his center.

Then it happened. For the opening faceoff of the third period, Skinner joined Eichel and Victor Olofsson at center ice. It wasn't a fluke. The left winger was really getting another shot on Buffalo's top line.

Now we'll see how long it lasts.

With Sam Reinhart injured and Tage Thompson struggling, coach Ralph Krueger finally gave Skinner regular shifts with Buffalo's best center. The move didn't contribute to the 4-3 shootout victory over New Jersey, but Skinner's minutes and stature grew.

"We just weren't pleased with the five-on-five scoring chance production, so we mixed things up," Krueger said in KeyBank Center. "It was just something I wanted to look at. I thought Jeff was having a good game.

"Jeff earned that opportunity."

Skinner skated nine shifts for 7 minutes, 19 seconds during the third period, almost equaling his output of 11 shifts and 7:46 through the opening two periods. He might've gotten even more if he hadn't flipped the puck out of play and gone to the penalty box for delay of game early in the third.

Skinner's ice time of 15:05 was his second-highest total of the season. But he got just 10:35 at even strength, Buffalo's fourth-lowest total. It continued a mind-blowing free fall for a guy who's been relied upon throughout his career.

Jeff Skinner's even-strength ice time

2012-13	15:35
2016-17	15:27
2018-19	15:24
2011-12	15:02
2017-18	14:36
2015-16	14:19
2013-14	14:04
2019-20	14:00
2014-15	13:56
2010-11	13:32
2020-21	11:48

"Everyone has sort of a role," Skinner said, "and it's important that with the opportunity you get, you go out and you play as hard as you can and compete and work hard so you can help the team win."

The Sabres won, improving to 3-0-2 in the past five games, but Skinner's role remains a talking point.

On one hand, the move to the top line was long overdue. Skinner is fifth on the team with 23 shots. He's been on the ice for 20 high-danger chances, which trails only Taylor Hall, Eichel and Reinhart, according to Natural Stat Trick.

On the other hand, Skinner has yet to score this season. He has only three goals in his past 39 games. He's found the net just 18 times in his past 93 outings.

"Goal scorers will always be measured by the goals he scores, not the chances he creates," Krueger said.

Simply put, Skinner needs to start scoring. The best place for that to happen is next to Eichel.

Of all the forwards Skinner has skated with during his 11-year career, he's produced better with Eichel than anyone else. Going back to 2010, here are Skinner's linemates for at least 180 minutes per season (or the equivalent of 180 minutes for years shortened by lockouts and COVID-19). Each column is sortable by clicking at the top.

Sabres fans clearly remember Skinner's 40-goal season fueled by Eichel. They also remember last year's 14-goal season without the center. It's why Saturday's reunion could be a big deal.

"Jeff's got to continue to create," Krueger said. "We all know he's a bunch scorer, and when he gets one, he'll get many."

Here's the report card, based on Game Score by The Athletic's Dom Luszczyszyn.

Good

Jake McCabe and Rasmus Ristolainen: The defense partners rebounded from their first bad game of the season and contributed in every facet. They were on the ice for 1:42 of New Jersey's five-on-three power play during the first period and held the Devils without a shot. At even strength, Buffalo had a 16-8 edge in shot attempts with the defensemen on the ice. Ristolainen also set a perfect power-play screen midway through the third period to give the Sabres a 3-2 lead.

Ristolainen skated a game-high 26:50.

Hall: He had two assists, giving him eight helpers and nine points in nine games.

Olofsson: Devils goalie Scott Wedgewood never had a chance with Ristolainen in front and the puck on Olofsson's stick. The winger leads the Sabres with four goals.

"It's a lot easier to score when he's in front there, for sure," Olofsson said of Ristolainen.

Fine

Eichel: The center missed 12 minutes of the third period after taking a puck to the face. He still led Sabres forwards in ice time at 22:49. Eichel scored the only goal in the shootout as Buffalo improved to 4-3-2 overall.

Rasmus Dahlin: The defenseman had three shots and an assist.

Eric Staal: The center is starting to feel comfortable, scoring for the third time in five games. Staal's 439th goal moved him past Gary Roberts and into 68th place on the NHL's all-time list. He centered Skinner while Eichel was getting repairs in the trainers' room.

Lazar: He joined Ristolainen and McCabe in playing the opening 1:42 of the five-on-three. Lazar was also on the ice for Olofsson's power-play goal, taking Eichel's spot.

"Curtis Lazar on that penalty kill was absolutely world class, just the way he synchronized there with McCabe and Ristolainen," Krueger said. "His eyes were popping out of his head when I asked him to go play power play. I said, 'Just win the draw and go stand in the slot,' and that's what he did and the boys took care of the rest.

"You love those character players in your lineup."

Colin Miller: He earned an assist and leads Buffalo defensemen with three points.

Tobias Rieder: The winger scored his third goal of the season, tying the game just 43 seconds after New Jersey took a 2-1 lead.

"It feels good to score a bunch of goals early," Rieder said.

Thompson: The winger, who was scratched for the previous three games, started on the top line in place of the injured Reinhart. Reinhart is day-to-day with an upper-body injury.

Thompson played just 1:57 during the third period and overtime.

"He's been a student over the last few games," said Krueger, who worked with Thompson on positional play, defense and physicality. "He's looking for information and understanding of what it will take for him to be a regular in the lineup and put pressure on the top 12 that we had up until now. It's in his hands to show what he's learned."

Linus Ullmark: The goalie stopped all three of New Jersey's shootout attempts, which should be no surprise. He's turned aside 30 of 35 breakaways during his career, a save percentage of .857 that ranks second in NHL history among goalies who've faced at least 20 shots. Johan Holmqvist is first at .865.

Bad

Henri Jokiharju: The Devils led 18-4 in shot attempts and scored once with the defenseman on the ice.

But when Jokiharju and the Sabres left the arena Saturday, they were sitting in an East Division playoff spot. They've earned their place by picking up eight of a possible 10 points in their past five games.

Now the team, like Skinner, wants to remain in a prominent spot.

"I'm pleased with the effort," Krueger said. "Again, we found a way to win."

Sabres win another tight game, keep moving up standings

By Bill Hoppe
Olean Times Herald
January 30, 2021

BUFFALO – In the not-so-distant past, the Sabres might've lost a game like Saturday afternoon's 4-3 shootout win over the New Jersey Devils.

The Sabres looked disjointed much of the day, uncharacteristically taking a string of penalties and blowing two leads, including one in the waning minutes.

Still, they prevailed again, earning their third one-goal victory this season.

"That's a sign of good teams," Sabres center Eric Staal said of finding a way to win. "When you're not at your best, you're still picking up points in the column. I think we're still taking steps."

Maturity has kept buoying the Sabres, who have registered points in five straight outings. They've trailed in each of their last three wins before roaring back.

On Tuesday, the Sabres eked out a 3-2 win over the New York Rangers. On Sunday, they won a 4-3 shootout over the Washington Capitals.

Coach Ralph Krueger said the recent triumphs illustrate the Sabres are "learning to embrace tight matches."

"Definitely the character in the room and the language and calmness in our group, we're much, much calmer than last season with going up, going down, tie games," Krueger said on a Zoom call. "The language is good. I've told you all it's good we have this adversity early already, it's making us more resilient for these kind of games and understanding that it's going to be like this every day."

Sabres captain Jack Eichel secured Saturday's win inside KeyBank Center, scoring in the first round of the shootout. Goalie Linus Ullmark then slammed the door, stopping all three of New Jersey's attempts.

The wins have vaulted the Sabres up to fourth place in the new East Division.

For a few minutes, it appeared the Sabres might earn a regulation win. Winger Victor Olofsson's power-play goal from the right circle – defenseman Rasmus Ristolainen moved up front and screened goalie Scott Wedgewood – put them up 3-2 10:56 into the third period.

Eichel missed that power play and a chunk of the third period after he took a puck up high, according to the MSG broadcast.

"We kind of wanted to, especially with Risto in front, just keep it simple, get pucks to the net," Olofsson said of the power-play strategy without Eichel.

New Jersey's Janne Kuokkanen tied it at 3 at 14:41.

The Sabres had remained disciplined for two weeks, consistently staying out of the penalty box before Saturday. But they were whistled for a season-high five infractions against New Jersey.

After Staal's third goal in four games opened the scoring almost midway in the second period, Ty Smith's power-play goal tied it.

Andreas Johnsson briefly put New Jersey up early in the third period before Rieder knotted it at 2:18.

Staal has quietly been showcasing more comfort, generating offense while entrenching himself as the Sabres' No. 2 center.

"Definitely the confidence is continuing to grow and get better every day within our structure and the type of game that I can play," said Staal, who was acquired in an offseason trade from the Minnesota Wild. "I think the body's felt good."

Staal also felt good beside Taylor Hall, his new left winger. Hall assisted on Staal's goal before registering another one when Olofsson scored.

"When you're out there with a guy like Taylor Hall, he draws so much attention to him," Staal said. "He can really drive the puck up the ice. You've got to make sure that you're in the right spot and help out as much as you can."

The Sabres host the Devils again Sunday afternoon.

Sabres notes: Jeff Skinner replaces Tage Thompson on top line

By Bill Hoppe
Olean Times Herald
January 30, 2021

BUFFALO – After skating on the fourth line all season, Sabres winger Jeff Skinner found himself in a familiar spot with top center Jack Eichel late in Saturday afternoon's 4-3 shootout win over the New Jersey Devils.

After Tage Thompson struggled filling in for injured winger Sam Reinhart, Sabres coach Ralph Krueger promoted Skinner to the first line for the third period at KeyBank Center.

"We just weren't pleased with five-on-five scoring-chance production so we mixed things up," Krueger said on a Zoom call.

Victor Olofsson, who began the game as Eichel's left winger, shifted to right wing to accommodate Skinner. Thompson, meanwhile, moved to the fourth line beside center Curtis Lazar and Riley Sheahan.

"I thought Jeff earned that opportunity," Krueger said.

Skinner, of course, occupied a spot beside Eichel throughout most of the 2018-19 season, when he scored a career-high 40 goals.

But Krueger separated the duo last year, only reuniting them days before the season ended. This year, Skinner has played every game with Lazar and Sheahan.

While that line has been effective, Skinner remains goalless.

The 6-foot-7, 219-pound Thompson received an opportunity because an upper-body injury forced Reinhart to miss his first game since March 28, 2017.

Thompson had sat out three straight games and four of the last five as a healthy scratch.

"Like with anybody that comes into our style of play, it's the responsibility everybody must carry away from the puck and he has been a student over the last few games and in between," Krueger said before the game. "We spent time with him on that part of the game and the physicality that's needed and the positional play that we expect."

Thompson, 23, enjoyed a stellar training camp, earning a spot beside Eichel. But he struggled early, going pointless in four outings. He quickly lost his spot in the lineup.

Prior to January, he hadn't played a game in nearly 14 months after injuring his right shoulder and undergoing surgery last year.

"He was out of hockey for longer than anybody here on the roster, so for him to get up to speed on all these things is going to take a little bit more time," Krueger said.

Thompson registered three shots on goal in 11 minutes, 44 seconds of ice time Saturday. He also skated on the second power-play unit.

Krueger said Reinhart, who was injured in Thursday's 3-2 overtime loss to the New York Rangers, is day to day. Rookie winger Dylan Cozens replaced him on the top power-play unit.

—

Krueger wouldn't reveal if goalie Carter Hutton will start this afternoon's rematch against New Jersey.

Hutton hasn't played since getting hit in the head Jan. 19. He has, however, backed up Linus Ullmark the last three contests.

"If you look at him, he's back very close to 100%," Krueger said of Hutton. "He needed, for sure, another day before he's there. Linus' confidence is growing and building."

Ullmark has started five straight games. The Swede stopped all three of New Jersey's shootout attempts Saturday and has thwarted nine of the 10 chances he has faced this season.

His career shootout save percentage of .857 ranks second all-time among NHL goalies who have faced at least 20 shots.

—

Sabres defenseman Henri Jokiharju returned Saturday after an upper-body injury sidelined him two games. To make room, Matt Irwin was scratched.

—

During a timeout, the Sabres congratulated Devils coach Lindy Ruff for coaching his 1,500th NHL game Thursday. Ruff coached the Sabres from 1997 to 2013.

Tage Thompson to replace injured Sam Reinhart against Devils

By Bill Hoppe

Olean Times Herald

January 30, 2021

BUFFALO – An upper-body injury will sideline Sabres winger Sam Reinhart for this afternoon’s game against the New Jersey Devils, coach Ralph Krueger said.

Winger Tage Thompson will replace Reinhart, who was injured in Thursday’s 3-2 overtime loss to the New York Rangers.

Thompson has sat out three straight games and four of the last five as a healthy scratch. Reinhart, meanwhile, hasn’t missed a game since late in 2016-17.

The 6-foot-7, 219-pound Thompson, 23, enjoyed a stellar training camp, earning a spot on the top line beside captain Jack Eichel. But he struggled early, going pointless in four outings. He quickly lost his spot in the lineup.

The American hadn’t played any games in nearly 14 months after injuring his right shoulder and undergoing surgery last year.

“He was out of hockey for longer than anybody here on the roster, so for him to get up to speed on all these things is going to take a little bit more time,” Sabres coach Ralph Krueger said on a Zoom call this morning.

In other lineup news, Krueger said goalie Linus Ullmark will start this afternoon at KeyBank Center, his fifth straight nod.

Five Observations: Sabres top Devils 4-3 in a shootout

By Adam Unger

WKBW

January 30, 2021

BUFFALO, N.Y. (WKBW) — All of the extra hockey Buffalo's been playing lately has kept the Sabres' point streak alive. But the blue and gold wound up on the right side of a shootout against the New Jersey Devils on Saturday afternoon.

The 4-3 win is Buffalo's third win in the last five games. It's also the Sabres' fourth game in the last five that went to overtime or a shootout. Jack Eichel's shootout goal wound up being the difference-maker in the victory. The Devils and Sabres are back at it again at 1:00 p.m. on Sunday at KeyBank Center.

Five observations from Saturday's game:

Bend, don't break

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A perfect penalty kill is nearly impossible. And offensive zone penalties were killer; those can't happen. But considering how many opportunities the Devils had with the man advantage, one half of Buffalo's special teams was still the name of the game today.

Killing off the early 5-on-3 was huge for the Sabres. As unusual as it was for New Jersey to not use the entire offensive zone to its advantage, that big of a kill put some wind in Buffalo's sails and was something to hang their hat on going into the first intermission. Say what you will about the bottom six at even strength. But 80% on the year is nothing to scoff at.

More opportunities for Cozens

Over the last week and a half, we've seen 2019 first round pick Dylan Cozens work his way up the Sabres' lineup. From the outset of training camp, the 19-year-old has looked like he belonged. And he still does. Learning from Eric Staal should continue to benefit him going forward.

But the absence of Sam Reinhart brought Cozens another opportunity to play among Buffalo's best: he took Reinhart's place on the first power play unit. That group was a bit of a rotating door with Jack Eichel's absence as well. But Cozens's presence was still felt around the net. He's no Reinhart. But that was one more big step that Cozens showed he could handle on Saturday.

Riding the hot hand

After an initial commitment to alternating goalies for back-to-back games, head coach Ralph Krueger has walked back on that, and with good reason. Linus Ullmark has been playing out of his mind for the last few games. He also kept the Devils scoreless in the shootout. He's stopped 90% of the shootout attempts he's faced this year.

Even though the shot total isn't as lopsided as it was on Thursday, Ullmark kept the Sabres in the game early on. Bad mistakes in the offensive end and the neutral zone led to golden opportunities for New Jersey. Whatever zone Ullmark has been in, let him stay there. He can rest on Monday when the Sabres have a day off.

Changes keep coming up front

It seems like the forward group gets mixed up nearly every game at 5-on-5. There's not going to be a single answer for the entire season. But Ralph Krueger sounded like he liked what he had seen because of the points Buffalo has picked up since last Friday.

The best thing about Saturday's mix-up is that Jeff Skinner is on a line that will give him some help offensively. Once Jack Eichel was back from a quick stitch-up, he was centering Skinner and Victor Olofsson. Skinner's been generating chances. If he gets more looks with this group, that should end his early drought.

No moral victories in OT

Every game is a division game. Every game directly affects the playoff race. The inability to finish off teams in regulation will wind up hurting the Sabres' chances in the long run. It's already an uphill battle when you look at the East Division on paper.

Four of the last five games have gone to either overtime or a shootout for the Sabres. Every game that goes to free hockey will make it even tougher for the Sabres to qualify for the playoffs.

Sabres top New Jersey in shootout, 4-3

By Paul Stockman

WIVB

January 30, 2021

BUFFALO, N.Y. (WIVB) – Regulation once again wasn't enough to decide the Sabres game on Saturday afternoon. They needed a shootout to top New Jersey, and thanks to some crucial saves from Linus Ullmark and an equally critical goal from Jack Eichel, they were able to get the 4-3 win.

Neither team scored in overtime, forcing a shootout, the second for the Sabres in their last four games. Just like their last one against Washington six days ago, Jack Eichel led off the shootout with a goal to put them up 1-0. Goaltender Linus Ullmark held New Jersey off the board the rest of the way, allowing the Sabres to pick up the win.

Ullmark was once again a bright spot for the Sabres, stopping 31 shots on 34 attempts, and getting three more saves in the shootout to preserve the victory.

After a scoreless first period, the Sabres struck first when Eric Staal put one in the back of the net. New Jersey responded with a goal of its own, as Ty Smith provided the equalizer with less than two minutes to go in the period.

Less than two minutes into the third, New Jersey scored again, this time from Andreas Johnsson to make it 2-1. Tobias Rieder answered about 45 seconds later to tie things back up at 2. The Sabres then took the lead when Victor Olofsson scored on a power play to make it 3-2 Buffalo. New Jersey was able to tie it up and force overtime late in the 3rd period.

Eichel's eventual game-winner was the second time this week he scored the only shootout goal.

Buffalo moves to 4-3-2 and they host New Jersey again Sunday at 1 p.m.

Hamilton: The Sabres keep finding ways to pick up points

By Paul Hamilton

WGRZ

January 31, 2021

BUFFALO, N.Y. — Many keep asking me what's different about the Sabres this season. I can start with the last two games. Buffalo was awful against the Rangers, but still managed to eek out a point from the game. On Saturday, they were so-so, but still found a way to get a win in the shootout.

Last season they probably would've left both those games with no points instead of picking up three. The Sabres are 4-1-2 in their last seven games and have gotten points in six out of seven games. They also have no regulation losses in their last four games going 3-0-1.

One thing that had driven me crazy about this team for years is they have very few players that will stand in front of the net. Most want to play a perimeter game and you don't win playing that kind of hockey.

Devils goalie Scott Wedgewood started the season as New Jersey's third goalie. The former Rochester American was pressed into action after Corey Crawford retired and Mackenzie Blackwood wound up on the COVID-19 list.

With the Sabres best net front presence Sam Reinhart injured, Wedgewood may have had the easiest 40 minutes of his career on Saturday afternoon. He saw all the shots and was never bothered.

That changed when Jack Eichel was in the locker room after getting hit in the mouth with a puck. Ralph Krueger replaced Eichel on the power play with one of the strongest men in the National Hockey League and Rasmus Ristolainen went straight to the net and pretty much sat in Wedgewood's lap. Victor Olofsson was set up alone on the slot and all he had to do was pick a corner, because Wedgewood couldn't see a thing.

This is something Krueger did a few times last season with pretty good success.

This was a game where penalty killing was also key. Yes, the Devils did score a power play goal going 1-for-5 with the man advantage, but a huge turning point in this game came 12:15 in when Eric Staal and Brandon Montour took penalties giving New Jersey a full two-minute 5-on-3 advantage.

Ristolainen, Jake McCabe and Curtis Lazar did such a good job of killing it off that the Devils didn't even get a shot on goal. Had New Jersey scored once or twice on that 5-on-3, the game would've changed drastically. Krueger said by killing it off, it's almost like scoring a goal.

The Sabres have had two, two-game series in a row where they've taken three out of four points. Once they've been 1-1 and the other time they were swept by Washington. Buffalo has the opportunity to get its first sweep of the season with a win on Sunday afternoon.

In order to keep all this up though they are going to have to get back to playing like they did earlier this season. Play just so-so will catch up to them very soon.

Eichel, Ullmark propel Sabres past Devils in shootout

By Alex Brasky
Batavia Daily News
January 30, 2021

BUFFALO — For the fourth time in five games, the Sabres went to overtime on Saturday afternoon, going back and forth with the New Jersey Devils before winning the game, 4-3 in a shootout. The lone goal in the shootout came from Buffalo's Jack Eichel, while Linus Ullmark was a perfect 3-for-3 in net.

"It shows great character," said Victor Olofsson on his team's ability to win ugly as they did on Saturday. "At the same time, I feel we have to step it up a little bit here and get back to how we played a few games ago."

Eichel's tally began the shootout, with Rasmus Dahlin and Victor Olofsson each missing their chances, while Jesper Bratt, Nikita Gusev and Kyle Palmieri all came up short for New Jersey.

"The character, above all, got us this win today," added Sabres head coach Ralph Kruger postgame. "And Linus (Ullmark) with another outstanding performance."

Ullmark finished the game with 31 saves.

The first period went scoreless, and at the end of two, it was 1-1, but scoring exploded in the third.

Andreas Johnsson gave the Devils a 2-1 lead 1:37 into the final stanza of regulation on a wrister, which came off assists from Jack Hughes (5) and Damon Severson (2). Buffalo returned serve seconds later to tie the game at two, as Tobias Rieder netted his third of the season 2:18 into the third. Rieder's goal came after a strong play from Cody Eakin, who battled with a Devils' player behind the net, won the puck and made a nice pass to Rieder, who put it past NJ goaltender Scott Wedgewood for the equalizer. Eakin was credited with his first assist of the season, while Colin Miller (2) also assisted on the play.

Less than a minute later Ullmark came away with a sprawling save on a give and go that finished with a laser from NJ's Hughes. Ullmark's save preserved the tie for the time being, and minutes later, Buffalo would regain the lead. This time, Victor Olofsson found the back of the net through a screen from Rasmus Ristolainen for his team-leading fourth goal of the season. Olofsson's tally came off assists from Rasmus Dahlin (2) and Taylor Hall (8) and gave the Sabres a 3-2 lead 10:56 into the final frame.

The Devils answered back minutes later to send the game to overtime, as Janne Kuokkanen threw one in from the side of the net with about five minutes to play in regulation. NJ's Michael McCleod (1) and Nathan Bastian (2) assisted on Kuokkanen's goal. Buffalo had a late power play opportunity with 1:52 to go in the third following a tripping penalty on Severson, but came up short to finish regulation 1-of-5 on the man advantage.

Despite Buffalo creating a couple of chances, neither team could muster a goal in the extra session and the Sabres wound up winning the game on Eichel's goal in the shootout.

"It's a sign of good teams normally. When you're not at your best, still picking up points," said Staal. "The two points are huge and we need to follow it up with a big one tomorrow."

The Sabres began Saturday's win with an electric start in the first, possessing the puck for much of the game's first five-plus minutes. The early momentum quickly faded, though, as Buffalo would soon go 10 minutes without a shot on goal, which allowed the Devils to battle their way back. To conclude the first period, the game remained scoreless, with the shots totaled at 7-6 in favor of Buffalo.

During the first, a bright spot for the Sabres was their effort on a 5-on-3 penalty kill following simultaneous penalties on Brandon Montour (tripping) and Eric Staal (slashing) 12:15 into the period. Both Curtis Lazar and Linus Ullmark came up big on the PK, with Lazar effectively pestering the Devils' PP unit and Ullmark making a key save near the midpoint of the two-man advantage.

"If you look at how Lazar, (Jake) McCabe and (Rasmus) Ristolainen took the shot lanes away and how well they anticipated and read their movements, that was a textbook 3-on-5," said Krueger. "We counted one scoring chance in those whole two minutes, which is extremely low for a 5-on-3 of the full length."

Buffalo lit the lamp midway through the second, as Eric Staal scored on a wrister from the slot off an excellent feed from Taylor Hall to give the Sabres a 1-0 lead.

Staal started the rush, flipping the puck to Brandon Montour, who then slid it over to Taylor Hall near the Buffalo bench. With Staal trailing, Hall made a nice pass, Staal received it and fired a shot pad side which clanked off the post and in. The veteran centerman showed great emotion after the puck crossed the goal line, throwing a fist pump to the cardboard cutouts in the crowd after giving Buffalo the advantage 9:03 into the period.

“(Hall) is such a play-driver. He backs people off and opens the ice up,” said Staal. “For me, it’s about being smart, knowing where to be and putting myself in a position to help him create a chance or create a chance for myself. A guy like him is fun to play with.”

It was Staal’s third goal of the season and he now has at least a point in four of his last five games. Montour recorded his second assist of the season.

Minutes later, Hall would take a holding penalty committed in the offensive zone, but once again, behind Ullmark, Buffalo killed the penalty and maintained the one-goal lead with about 10 minutes to go in the frame. The Sabres’ luck would run out with under two minutes to go until the intermission, as another penalty inside the offensive zone, this time a hooking penalty called on Staal, led to the Devils’ first goal of the game. Ty Smith fired a shot from the point, and with Ullmark screened by players in front of the net, the Sabres goaltender had little chance of stopping it. Smith was assisted by P.K. Subban and Pavel Zacha, and the period ended with the scored tied at one 18:35 into the period.

Buffalo once again outshot the Devils, 14-11 in the second, but were outshot 34-31 for the game.

With the win, the Sabres are now 4-3-2 and look ahead to the second game of a back-to-back against the Devils Sunday at KeyBank Center.

Hall, Sabres use shootout to hand Devils third straight loss

By Heather Engel

NHL.com

January 30, 2021

BUFFALO -- Taylor Hall had two assists for the Buffalo Sabres in his first game against his former team, a 4-3 shootout win against the New Jersey Devils at KeyBank Center on Saturday.

Hall, who played four seasons with the Devils from 2016-19, was traded to the Arizona Coyotes on Dec. 16, 2019. He signed a one-year contract with the Sabres on Oct. 11.

"He's such a play driver that he backs people off and he just opens the ice up," Sabres forward Eric Staal said of Hall. "He's got tremendous speed, power and obviously the respect around the League with his talent level and what he's done in the past that he's going to garner a little more attention and a little bit more time for his linemates."

Linus Ullmark made 31 saves and stopped all three shootout attempts. Staal, Tobias Rieder and Victor Olofsson scored for the Sabres (4-3-2), and Jack Eichel scored the only goal in the shootout.

"Definitely the character in the room and the language and calmness in our group, we're much, much calmer than last season with going up, going down, tie games," Buffalo coach Ralph Krueger said. "The language is good. It's good we have this adversity early already; it's making us more resilient for these kind of games and understanding that it's going to be like this every day. So I'm pleased with the effort."

Janne Kuokkanen scored his first NHL goal, and Scott Wedgewood made 28 saves for the Devils (3-3-2), who have lost three straight.

The teams play again here Sunday.

"You look at some of the big opportunities we had, great scoring opportunities," Devils coach Lindy Ruff said. "I look at the opportunity Jack [Hughes] had (one-timer saved by Ullmark in the third), we had a couple other ones around the net that we missed. The common theme through these first games has been we've missed too many good opportunities."

New Jersey was 1-for-5 on the power play but did not have a shot on goal on a two-minute 5-on-3 in the first period.

"They did a good job of packing it in and obviously we have five and they have three, there's going to be holes and stuff, but it felt like we were looking for too pretty of a play," Devils defenseman Damon Severson said. "It wasn't enough of a shot mentality. We had a couple looks, we were trying to make the pretty passes but sometimes you just have to blast a few and get a couple on net."

Staal took a pass from Hall in the high slot to give the Sabres a 1-0 lead at 9:03 of the second period.

"For me, it's being smart, knowing where to be and putting myself in position to, whether to help [Hall] create a chance to create a chance for myself," Staal said. "It's one of those things that a guy like him is fun to play with."

Ty Smith tied it 1-1 on the power play at 18:35 of the second with a point shot through traffic.

Andreas Johnsson's shot from the left circle put the Devils ahead 2-1 at 1:37 of third period. The Sabres tied it 41 seconds later on Rieder's shot from the left face-off dot at 2:18.

Olofsson scored a power-play goal from the top of the right circle to make it 3-2 at 10:56 of the third. Hall got the secondary assist.

Kuokkanen slipped the puck past Ullmark at the side of the net at 14:41 to tie it 3-3.

The Sabres are 3-0-2 in their past five games with four decided after regulation.

"We found a way to win and our specialty teams chipped in, but the character, above all, definitely got us this win today," Krueger said. "And Linus with another outstanding performance."

NOTES: Eichel left briefly in the third period before returning. ... Sabres forward Sam Reinhart missed his first game since March 28, 2017 (246 consecutive). He did not play because of an upper-body injury and is day to day.

'It shows great character' | Sabres find a way in win over Devils

By Jourdon LaBarber

Sabres.com

January 30, 2021

Ralph Krueger sensed a calmness in the Sabres' dressing room Saturday as they navigated another performance in which they had less than their best.

Once again, the Sabres left the building with something to show for it. Jack Eichel scored the lone goal in a shootout to clinch a 3-2 win over the New Jersey Devils, giving the Sabres points in five straight games (3-0-2) and pushing them above .500 for the first time this season.

Each of Buffalo's last five games has been decided by one goal.

"We're much, much calmer than last season with going up, going down, tie games," Krueger said. "The language is good. I've told you all it's good we have this adversity early already. It's making us more resilient for these kinds of games and understanding that it's going to be like this every day."

The Sabres were disappointed with their play Thursday against the New York Rangers but managed to come away with a point thanks to an outstanding effort from goaltender Linus Ullmark. They found a way again Saturday, this time thanks to a confluence of details that added up by the end of regulation.

Ullmark once again made timely stops during a 31-save effort. Rasmus Ristolainen, Jake McCabe, and Curtis Lazar combined for a crucial 5-on-3 penalty kill during the first period. Eric Staal and Tobias Rieder provided even-strength scoring and a tweak to the power play helped create the go-ahead goal from Victor Olofsson in the third.

"I think it shows great character," Olofsson said. "We've been down in a lot of these games, too. It's really strong to come back when we're not playing as good as we want all the time."

"So, I mean, it shows great character, but at the same time, I thought we maybe got to step up a little bit here and get back to how we played a few games ago."

Here five more takeaways from the victory.

1. Shootout recipe works again

The Sabres won the competition using the same formula that worked in their victory in Washington last Sunday: a searing wrist shot from Eichel and a perfect outing from Ullmark.

Ullmark has now stopped 30 of 35 career shootout attempts for a save percentage of .857. That leads active goaltenders and ranks second all-time among goalies with at least 20 attempts.

"It's something that gives you confidence for those situations in the future," Krueger said. "We know we can take some risks and give up the odd-man rushes if we're ever behind with Linus in that kind of zone that he's in."

2. Penalty kill sets the tone

We already mentioned the 5-on-3 penalty kill, a crucial moment in what was still a game during the first period. Staal and Brandon Montour were both called for penalties as Jesper Bratt deked his way toward the Buffalo net, giving New Jersey a full two minutes with the two-man advantage.

Lazar, McCabe, and Ristolainen were on for 1:42 of those two minutes. The Devils did not record a shot on goal and had just one scoring chance by the Sabres' internal count.

"If you look at how Lazar, McCabe and Ristolainen took the shot lanes away and how well they anticipated and read their movements, that was a textbook three-on-five," Krueger said. "I thought Jersey moved the puck well."

"... That was truly a moment when we were tested. You almost feel like you score a goal when the guys kill like that. Linus, finally, behind all that just stayed extremely calm."

The penalty kill finished the game 4-for-5, allowing a goal to defenseman Ty Smith on a shot from the point during the second period. It is 10-for-11 over the past three games.

3. Staal heats up

Staal put the Sabres on the board during the second period, giving him three goals and four points in his past five games. The veteran set off the sequence of events that led to the goal with a pass to Montour in the neutral zone. Montour carried the puck over the blue and passed to Taylor Hall, who set up the shot from Staal.

The goal was the 439th of Staal's career, moving him ahead of Gary Roberts on the NHL's all-time list. He trails only Alex Ovechkin (707), Patrick Marleau (562) and Sidney Crosby (465) among active players.

4. A tweak on the power play

Assistant coach Don Granato said earlier this week that using Rasmus Ristolainen at the net-front - a look the Sabres utilized late last season - was still in the toolbox. Buffalo went to it for the first time this season with the game on the line during the third period.

There was one other wrinkle. With Jack Eichel being tended to after taking a puck to the face, Krueger called upon Lazar to take the draw and play the bumper position.

"His eyes were popping out of his head when I asked him to go play power play," Krueger said. "I said, 'Just win the draw and go stand in the slot.' That's what he did, and the boys took care of the rest."

Once Lazar won the faceoff, Ristolainen made his way to the net. He planted his 6-foot-4, 221-pound frame in front of goaltender Scott Wedgewood as Olofsson shot from the right circle.

"He's so good and he's really big," Olofsson said of Ristolainen. "He's parked right in front of the goalkeeper. You just got to make sure he doesn't see the puck when I'm shooting it. It's a lot easier to score when he's in front, for sure."

5. Lineup notes

Sam Reinhart did not play and is considered day-to-day with an upper-body injury. Tage Thompson re-entered the lineup in his place alongside Olofsson and Eichel but was replaced on the line by Jeff Skinner late during the second period.

"It was just something I wanted to look at," Krueger said. "I thought Jeff was having a good game and you know that we're quick, even in tie games, at doing things to win. We're all about trying to get the 'W' no matter what, even in regular time."

Henri Jokiharju returned to the lineup after missing the past two games with an injury, skating 16:00.

At The Final Horn: Devils 3 - Sabres 4 (SO)

By Chris Ryndak

Sabres.com

January 30, 2021

The Buffalo Sabres extended their point streak to five games with a 4-3 shootout win over the New Jersey Devils on Saturday at KeyBank Center.

Eric Staal, Tobias Rieder, and Victor Olofsson scored for Buffalo, and Jack Eichel scored the only goal in the shootout.

Linus Ullmark made 31 saves plus three more in the shootout.

All four of Olofsson's goals this season have come with the man advantage. Staal now has points in four of the last five games (3+1), and five of the last seven (3+2).

Ty Smith, Andreas Johnsson and Janne Kuokkanen were New Jersey's goal scorers. Scott Wedgewood stopped 27 of Buffalo's shots.

Buffalo's power play went 1-for-4 on the night while the penalty kill was 4-for-5.

What happened

With 7:45 remaining in the opening period and both Eric Staal and Brandon Montour in the box, the Sabres were faced with a 5-on-3 Devils power play.

Through the strong play primarily of Curtis Lazar, Jake McCabe and Rasmus Ristolainen, New Jersey didn't even register a shot on goal in the full two minutes despite 1:40 of zone time at the start of the man advantage. Shots were 5-1 in the Buffalo's favor at that point.

The Sabres opened the second period with two power plays in the first eight minutes, but the Devils were able to kill them both off.

Between the power plays, the Devils had a few great chances, including a shot by defenseman Damon Severson that ran off the crossbar 3:51 into the second.

Buffalo finally broke through when Staal scored at the 9:03 mark of the second. On a nice passing play entering the zone, defenseman Brandon Montour passed the puck to Taylor Hall who then gave it to Staal. The veteran center wristed one off the post and in from between the top of the faceoff circles to give Buffalo a 1-0 lead.

The Devils tied it with just 1:25 left in the second when Smith's shot made its way in through traffic on the power play.

The third period turned out to be a wild one with four goals scored between the two clubs.

The Devils scored early with Johnsson's snipe over Ullmark's shoulder 1:37 into the period. Then Rieder put one in 41 seconds later for his third of the season after some nice work from Cody Eakin behind the net.

Olofsson's goal gave the Sabres the lead back with his wrister on the power play with 9:02 left in regulation. However, the Devils didn't quit and with 5:19 remaining, Kuokkanen was able to knock one in short side to make it a 3-3 game.

Olofsson rang one off the left post with 1:54 remaining and Buffalo immediately went back on the power play following the stoppage. However, they weren't able to convert, forcing overtime.

Eichel scored in the top of the first round of the shootout and Ullmark stopped all three shots he saw.

Worth a mention

Tage Thompson returned to the lineup after being a healthy scratch the past three games. Sam Reinhart did not play due to an upper-body injury and Thompson played on a line with Jack Eichel and Victor Olofsson. Reinhart is considered day-to-day and could play tomorrow.

The Devils were without forward Nico Hischier (leg), goaltender Mackenzie Blackwood and forward Travis Zajac due to being on the COVID-19 protocol list, and goaltender Aaron Dell and defenseman Sami Vatanen, who are awaiting the completion of the visa and quarantine process.

Roll the highlight film

Here's Olofsson's goal that put Buffalo ahead midway through the third:

Coming up

The series concludes with another afternoon game at KeyBank Center. Faceoff between the Sabres and Devils is scheduled for 1 p.m. on MSG and WGR 550. Pregame coverage on MSG will start at 12:30.

It will be the final contest of the four-game homestand.

Reinhart (upper body) to miss Saturday's game

By Jourdon LaBarber

Sabres.com

January 30, 2021

Sam Reinhart will not play Saturday for the Sabres in their matinee against the New Jersey Devils.

Reinhart missed practice on Friday due to an upper-body injury. Sabres coach Ralph Krueger said he is considered day-to-day.

Tage Thompson will re-enter the lineup in Reinhart's place and is expected to skate on a line with Victor Olofsson and Jack Eichel. Thompson began the season skating on a line with Eichel but has been a healthy scratch the past three games.

"He's been a student over the last few games," Krueger said. "We've spent time with him on (the defensive) part of the game and just the physicality that's needed and the positional play that we expect. He was out of hockey for longer than anybody here on the roster so for him to get up to speed and all of these things is going to take a little bit more time."

Thompson, 23, sustained a shoulder injury that required season-ending surgery during his debut season debut with the Sabres in 2019-20. He returned from the long layoff with a standout performance in the abbreviated training camp.

"He's looking for information and understanding of what it will take for him to be a regular in the lineup and put pressure on the top 12 that we had up until now. It's in his hands to show what he's learned, what he's been able to do. But we are patient with Tage."

The lineup

Here's how the Sabres practiced Friday, with some changes up top.

68 Victor Olofsson - 9 Jack Eichel - 72 Tage Thompson
4 Taylor Hall - 12 Eric Staal - 24 Dylan Cozens
13 Tobias Rieder - 20 Cody Eakin - 21 Kyle Okposo
53 Jeff Skinner - 27 Curtis Lazar - 15 Riley Sheahan

19 Jake McCabe - 55 Rasmus Ristolainen
10 Henri Jokiharju - 62 Brandon Montour
26 Rasmus Dahlin - 33 Colin Miller

Linus Ullmark will make his fifth straight start in net coming on the heels of a 36-save outing against the New York Rangers on Thursday.

Scouting the Devils

New Jersey enters the series shorthanded with goaltender Mackenzie Blackwood and forward Travis Zajac both on the COVID-related absence list. Nico Hischier, the first-overall pick in 2017, has missed the start of the season with a lower-body injury.

The Devils' other No. 1 pick - 2019 selection Jack Hughes - has picked up the slack in the meantime. Hughes leads the Devils with seven points (3+4), already a third of the way to his 61-game total as a rookie last season.

A couple familiar faces you'll see: Lindy Ruff is in his first year as the Devils' head coach after spending the last three seasons as an assistant with the Rangers. Scott Wedgewood - who spent the 2018-19 season in the Sabres organization - has been the starter in net in Blackwood's absence.

Tune in

Coverage on MSG begins at 12:30 p.m. with puck drop set for 1. You can listen to the game on WGR 550.