



Buffalo Sabres

Daily Press Clips

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New York visits Buffalo after Pageau's 2-goal game

Associated Press

February 14, 2021

New York Islanders (6-4-3, fourth in the East Division) vs. Buffalo Sabres (4-4-2, eighth in the East Division)

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

BOTTOM LINE: The Buffalo Sabres host New York after Jean-Gabriel Pageau scored two goals in the Islanders' 4-2 win over the Bruins.

Buffalo went 30-31-8 overall and 10-12-2 in division action a season ago. The Sabres scored 193 total goals last season while collecting 315 assists.

New York went 35-23-10 overall and 11-7-4 in division action a season ago. Goalies for the Islanders recorded two shutouts last season while compiling a .911 save percentage.

The teams match up Monday for the first time this season.

INJURIES: Sabres: Dylan Cozens: out (covid protocol), Rasmus Ristolainen: out (health and safety protocols), Brandon Montour: out (covid protocol), Jake McCabe: out (health and safety protocols), Tobias Rieder: out (covid protocol), Sam Reinhart: out (upper body), Curtis Lazar: out (covid protocol), Taylor Hall: out (health and safety protocols).

Islanders: None listed.

As energy returns after Covid-19 bout, Sabres coach Ralph Krueger thrilled by return

By Mike Harrington
The Buffalo News
February 14, 2021

One by one, Sabres players filtered onto the KeyBank Center ice Sunday morning. Taylor Hall was back for the second day and Rasmus Dahlin was the lone new addition.

Assistant Steve Smith was starting to run drills when a lone figure wearing the NHL-mandated KN95 mask with a Sabres logo on it emerged down the tunnel. Head coach Ralph Krueger, whom the team announced had tested positive for Covid-19 and battled symptoms for a week, fist-bumped staff members and equipment staff near the bench before stepping onto the ice.

He made the rounds, saying hello to players and even fist-bumped goaltender Linus Ullmark, who was down on a knee after a drill. It was a big relief to everyone in Blue and Gold to see the 61-year-old coach back in the saddle.

"First of all, I didn't want to fall down right after two weeks off," Krueger told reporters on a video call after practice. "So I checked that box. ... Getting out on the ice for a few minutes just gives you so much energy back. You know why you're here. You love the group you're working with and the potential of the group and the individuals. Outstanding to be back on the ice, be around the players and the staff and knowing our fans are waiting at home for us to get back in action. And yeah, I get a surge of energy right now just even talking about it."

For several days, Krueger had little to no energy. While many younger athletes such as Hall are asymptomatic, Covid-19 was no joke to the coach.

"I'm definitely feeling better. I had moderately severe symptoms," Krueger said. "I never did end up having a fever, but I did end up with a lot of aches and sleeping and fatigue for more than a week. So definitely time to realize how lethal this Covid is. Everybody knows I try to keep myself in good shape and manage that part of my life. But I had no chance and just really pleased in the last few days to get back to feeling more normal."

Krueger

Wearing a KN95 mask with the Sabres logo, head coach Ralph Krueger was back at practice Sunday morning.

The Sabres return to action Monday against the New York Islanders, ending a 14-day break since they last played Jan. 31 against New Jersey. It is the team's longest-ever layoff that was not the result of an Olympic break. Krueger, who said his wife has been testing negative, spent about 15 minutes on the ice before watching the rest of practice from the stands, and would not commit to returning behind the bench immediately.

"For sure, him being back, it's huge," said Dahlin, who tested negative and was on the Covid-19 list as a close contact. "He's doing well and he really got us going today and he's gonna get us going tomorrow, too. So it's going to be a great day. I'm looking forward to tomorrow."

"Today was an excellent day to spend with staff and with players," Krueger said. "I went soft on the ice, but otherwise, really trying to go through a regular day. And then we'll see how I feel tomorrow morning. So far, feeling quite well, scarred by the experience and grateful to be one of the people coming out of it. And I also really pay my respects to the people working in medical care."

With the return of Hall and Dahlin, the Sabres still have seven players on the Covid-19 protocol list – including the top defense pair of Rasmus Ristolainen and Jake McCabe, as well as Tobias Rieder, Brandon Montour, Dylan Cozens, Curtis Lazar and Casey Mittelstadt.

Although it would seem unlikely any of those seven would be available Monday night, Krueger left a window open that there could be some returnees when the team hits the ice Monday for its morning skate.

The coach said the Sabres' staff was planning a meeting with General Manager Kevyn Adams to ponder the Sabres' roster for the busy week ahead, which opens with back-to-back games against the Islanders.

As for the outbreak that happened in the wake of the Sabres' back-to-back games against New Jersey two weeks ago, Krueger did not want to indict the Devils or the NHL. The league put even more protocols in place last week in wake of the situation, and that's all Krueger was focusing on.

"We clearly had a rough weekend there," Krueger said. "But for me, I like to be constructive. And I'm happy the NHL has been as constructive as possible in learning from the experience that we had. So it seems to make it worthwhile. ... What happened on that weekend, obviously, it's quite clear that the information that we had just a few days after, and what the NHL had at that point ... there was a big divide between what they knew."

Dahlin was one of the last two players added to the Covid-19 list, going on it Feb. 7. He confirmed he will play Monday after taking a regular turn in practice on defense with Colin Miller and on the Sabres' top power-play unit. It is presumed that Dahlin is a close contact of Mittelstadt, with whom he has lived with the last couple of years.

"As soon as we got the news from the team, we moved away from each other," Dahlin said.

Sabres Notebook: With packed schedule, practice time will be at a premium

By Mike Harrington

The Buffalo News

February 14, 2021

Starting with their return to game action Monday night against the New York Islanders, the Buffalo Sabres have four games in the next six days, six games in the next eight days and nine games in the next 14 days.

You get the picture.

In fact, the team is now facing 46 games in 83 days under its revised schedule from Monday to the end of the season May 8. How in the world are the Sabres going to manage all that?

"You might have watched your last practice until May," coach Ralph Krueger deadpanned when asked about the issue after the team's workout Sunday morning at KeyBank Center.

He was only half-joking. The Sabres don't have two consecutive off days again until March 14-15, and practice time is going to be at a premium with nine games the rest of February and 16 in March.

"There's certainly no excuses this year, everyone's kind of going through it," winger Sam Reinhart said. "We still like the depth that we have and the guys that we have filling in. So we're looking forward to that challenge and opportunity."

"We need to really, really feel the group," Krueger said. "(The schedule dilemma) is on the top of our heads here as we do our brainstorming moving forward to manage the energy. The love for the game is large, and we need to keep the fun, we need to keep the pleasure high while we need to scrap ourselves back into the race."

That won't be easy. The Sabres have dropped into last place in the East Division – albeit with three or four games in hand on every team in the division except New Jersey.

"I think it's important not to look at the standings right now," Krueger said. "That we take the next block of 10 games, make sure that coming out of that we're in a good position and be patient with our reentry to be able to get our habits activated."

It is likely that the Sabres will be getting heavy input from their sport science department on when to practice, when to rest and when to take a gameday morning skate.

"We will have chats about that on a daily basis, because we need to especially monitor the high-minute guys," Krueger said. "And we need to do only one thing, and that's what's best for the team to have a chance to win hockey games. If it means staying off the ice between game days, if it means almost avoiding ice completely other than games for certain stretches, that could happen."

Debuts possible

The Sabres won't set their lineup until Monday's morning skate, but things have been mostly the same at practice the last two days. Unless someone comes off the Covid-19 protocol list and is able to step right back in the lineup, forward Steven Fogarty and defenseman Brandon Davidson could be in line to make their Sabres debuts. Forward C.J. Smith and defenseman Will Borgen could draw into the lineup for the first time this season.

Fogarty, the Rochester Amerks' captain, has been at left wing on the fourth line with Riley Sheahan and Tage Thompson. Smith is on the third line with Cody Eakin and Kyle Okposo.

Fogarty, 27, has played 18 games over the last three years with the New York Rangers. He has not registered a point. He has 34 goals over the last two years with Hartford of the AHL. Davidson, 29, has played 174 NHL games the last six years with six teams. He has been paired with Borgen, who has played 140 games in Rochester the last three years and made his NHL debut with four games for the Sabres in 2018-19.

Isles update

The Monday and Tuesday back-to-back games here are the first of eight meetings this season against the Islanders. The Sabres are just 2-6-2 in their last 10 games against the Isles, who advanced to the Eastern Conference final in the September bubble before losing to Tampa Bay.

When the Sabres were initially scheduled to go into Long Island for games on Feb. 2 and 4, the Islanders were reeling on an 0-3-2 stretch. Things are a whole lot different now for New York, which is 3-0-3 in its last six and coming off Saturday's 4-2 win over Boston. The Islanders have handed the East-leading Bruins their only two regulation losses of the season.

"We're playing a team as dedicated to the way it plays in the Islanders as anybody in our division and they're definitely finding their 'A' game at the moment," Krueger said. "So it'll be a big test right off the bat tomorrow."

Isles General Manager Lou Lamoriello earned his 1,300th career regular-season win Saturday and became the third GM in NHL history to reach the milestone, joining current Nashville GM David Poile (1,421) and Glen Sather (1,319).

Ralph Krueger, Rasmus Dahlin return to Sabres practice

By Mike Harrington

The Buffalo News

February 14, 2021

There were two more returnees to Buffalo Sabres practice Sunday morning in KeyBank Center and they were big names – head coach Ralph Krueger and defenseman Rasmus Dahlin.

Forward Taylor Hall returned Saturday and revealed he tested positive for Covid-19 but was asymptomatic. The Sabres announced Krueger's positive test on Feb. 4. Dahlin said he regularly tested negative and was on the list because he was a close contact.

Krueger, 61, took to the ice wearing the NHL-mandated large KN95 mask with a Sabres logo on it. He fist-bumped trainers and equipment men at the bench before he stepped on the ice and said hello to several players. Assistant Steve Smith continued to run practice as Krueger stayed off in the corners of the rink watching drills. About 15 minutes into practice, Krueger skated to Smith for a brief chat and then left the ice.

"I'm definitely feeling better. I had moderately severe symptoms," Krueger said. "I never did end up having a fever, but I did end up with a lot of aches and sleeping and fatigue for more than a week. So definitely time to realize how lethal this Covid is. Everybody knows I try to keep myself in good shape and manage that part of my life. But I had no chance and just really pleased in the last few days to get back to feeling more normal."

"For sure. him being back it's huge," Dahlin said. "He's doing well and he really got us going today and he's gonna get us going tomorrow, too. So it's going to be a great day. I'm looking forward to tomorrow."

Krueger praised the Sabres medical team for their work during his illness and said his wife repeatedly tested negative. Krueger said he will evaluate into Monday morning to decide if he will be back on the bench for the game against the Islanders or if he will have Smith run the team.

With the return of Hall and Dahlin, the Sabres still have seven players on the Covid-19 protocol list – including the top defense pair of Rasmus Ristolainen and Jake McCabe as well as Tobias Rieder, Brandon Montour, Dylan Cozens, Curtis Lazar and Casey Mittelstadt.

Although it would seem to be unlikely any of those seven would be available when the team returns to action Monday night against the New York Islanders, Krueger did leave a window open there could be some returnees when the team hits the ice Monday for its morning skate.

As for the outbreak that happened in the wake of the Sabres' back-to-back games against the New Jersey Devils on Jan. 30-31, Krueger did not want to indict the Devils or the NHL. The league put even more protocols in place last week in the wake of the situation and that's all Krueger was focusing on.

"We clearly had a rough weekend there," Krueger said. "But for me, I like to be constructive. And I'm happy the NHL has been as constructive as possible in learning from the experience that we had. So it seems to make it worthwhile. ... What happened on that weekend, obviously, it's quite clear that the information that we had just a few days after, and what the NHL had at that point ... there was a big divide between what they knew."

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Inside the Sabres: Mental health an area of focus during the pandemic

By Lance Lysowski

The Buffalo News

February 14, 2021

Steve Smith's poignant description of his daily morning routine encapsulated what many players, coaches and staff are experiencing across the National Hockey League during the pandemic.

Since the start of training camp in January, Smith, a 57-year-old assistant coach for the Buffalo Sabres, has awoken before dawn to check his phone for results from his latest Covid-19 test.

"I look for the green button and when I'm green, I'm a happy guy," said Smith, who is running Sabres practices while his friend and colleague, head coach Ralph Krueger, recovers from Covid-19. "But I've got to tell you, every morning I have a pit in my stomach wondering whether or not it's going to be my day. There's no doubt that there's fear in everyone, that's for certain."

Fear around the Sabres piqued when Covid-19 reached their dressing room, landing nine players on the NHL's protocol list and temporarily halting Buffalo's season after only 10 games. Krueger, 61, is symptomatic after testing positive for the virus and it's uncertain when he'll rejoin the team. One of his assistant coaches, Don Granato, may have to work from a distance because the 53-year-old is considered high-risk as the result of a battle with pneumonia and a blood infection in 2019.

Jack Eichel, a 24-year-old superstar center and team captain, admitted he experienced "anxiety," when awaiting initial test results after the Sabres hosted the New Jersey Devils on Jan. 30-31. And while there was an overwhelming sense of relief from those who resumed practice this week in KeyBank Center, all involved acknowledged that the uncertainty and anxiety won't soon disappear.

The reality of having to complete 46 games in as few as 86 days has moved mental health awareness to the forefront, as Sabres players, coaches and staff endure daily Covid-19 tests, quarantines, time away from loved ones and the disruption of treasured routines.

"For sure, that's definitely something I've been pretty vocal about publicly over the years," said 32-year-old winger Kyle Okposo, a vocal advocate for mental health awareness. "For me, I just want to make sure everybody's doing OK in that aspect. I think that as a group, the group of guys that are here have done a very good job of checking in with everybody and we've been interacting with everybody as much as we can on a personal level to make sure that guys are OK, we've been checking on the guys that are sick, that aren't doing well. ... It's taking care of each other because, hey, we're human beings first and foremost.

"If somebody's not doing well mentally, there's no possible way that they're going to be able to go out on the ice and perform to the best of their ability. We have to make sure that everybody is doing their part and checking in on each other and everybody's trying to get through this pandemic just like everybody else is."

Action on the ice during games isn't much different than normal times. Players and officials aren't wearing masks. There are still glass-wobbling body checks, highlight-reel offensive plays and the occasional fight. Yet, life for an NHL player off the ice is vastly different in almost every way.

Most of the 31 arenas have barred or limited fan attendance. Recent changes to in-arena protocols have removed the glass from behind the benches and penalty box. All team meetings must now be conducted virtually. The NHL is urging its players to not spend extended time sitting together unless all participants are sufficiently distanced and masked.

Bonding off the ice is almost impossible. Players can't eat together at each other's home or apartment. They must arrive at the arena no more than one hour and 45 minutes before puck drop unless receiving medical treatment. Time on the road outside the arena is mostly spent in the hotel room. The latest protocol changes include a directive for players and their household members to avoid public social interactions. Even grocery shopping is discouraged.

"First and foremost, they're human first," said Kellie Peiper, a sports psychology consultant who has her own practice in Buffalo and works with athletes of various skill levels. "Generally speaking, there is so much as

humans we can't control right now. We specifically are talking about high-performing people who are used to so much structure and having so much, what they perceive as control, over the details of their life, how they spend their time, how they continue to invest in their craft. ... Their identity is so closely tied to their performance, their training, their confidence and their abilities.

"All of us are dealing with anxiety of the unknown and what happens next and not being able to do our daily activities. That in and of itself can be a grieving process that we've lost the last year. It can be really traumatic."

The Sabres successfully navigated the challenges created by the protocols until an outbreak reached their dressing room following the two games against the Devils, who have since had as many as 19 players on the NHL Covid protocol list.

Following a 10-month offseason, and an arduous, shortened training camp, the Sabres were forced to quarantine for a week. Nine players remained in quarantine as of Friday. During the pause, coaches sent out video clips to be studied, and held individual and group virtual meetings with players. Each player was provided a stationary bike and small sheet of synthetic ice, the latter of which was used to hone stickhandling while players weren't allowed to skate.

Some, if not most, were isolated. The young Sabres from Europe are thousands of miles from family, including 20-year-old defenseman Rasmus Dahlin, who was added to the Covid protocol list Monday. Goalie Linus Ullmark, 27, was in Philadelphia when he received news that his father passed away in Sweden. Protocols would prevent Ullmark from returning home. His wife and two children did not come to Buffalo with him, either. Dylan Cozens, a 20-year-old center, has quarantined for approximately 28 days since mid-November, including 14 at Hockey Canada's tryout camp ahead of the IIHF World Junior Championship.

Even a few of the married players on the team were alone during quarantine. Eric Staal, a 36-year-old center acquired from a trade with Minnesota in August, chose to not uproot his wife, Tanya, and their three children to Buffalo during the pandemic.

The couple did not wish to disrupt the children's schooling or hockey schedules and various quarantine rules complicated matters. The routine of arriving home in Minnesota from a road trip to greet family is gone, replaced by the silence of his second-floor Buffalo apartment. During the recent weeklong quarantine, Staal had video calls with his family, some of which included him creating stickhandling drills for his children. Staal would show the boys a drill and have them repeat the movements.

"For that part, that's been tough, to be honest; that's the reality," said Staal. "I love, obviously, being with my kids and my wife, my family. ... Some ups and downs obviously now with the shutdown and going through what we have. It's been difficult to find traction. But we'll do what we can. I mean, there's nothing you can do about it. You wake up every day and you're worried about what you can control and right now it's the ability to come to the rink, compete, have fun, enjoy being out there and practicing hard and we've done that the last couple days."

Mental health was taboo in hockey for decades. The conversation has changed in recent years as more players have shared their stories about struggles with depression and anxiety. Former Sabres goalie Robin Lehner, now with the Vegas Golden Knights, became the most vocal advocate in 2018 when he detailed his battle with alcoholism and bipolar disorder, particularly during his three seasons in Buffalo.

The Sabres employ a mental performance specialist, Dr. Desaree Festa, who also works with the Bills. Help also is available through the NHL's player assistance program, which has a 24/7 hotline for targeted counseling needs, including those addressing mental health. The program is jointly funded by the NHL and NHLPA, and administered by the program doctors. Players have access to confidential counseling and a network of professional counselors are available in each NHL city.

The NHLPA also has a health and wellness group that is available to players and their families during the pandemic.

When the NHL held its most recent playoffs in a bubble, players described experiencing a sense of "cabin fever" while sealed off from the outside world. The format during this regular season has teams playing in their respective home arena, but time at home does not alleviate concerns about loved ones during the pandemic.

"For the last almost 11 months now I've kind of tried to take things seven days at a time," said Okposo. "Like, hey, long-term goals are seven days. There's no real planning ahead, and you just have to try to live in the moment. For me, my No. 1 goal is to try to make sure that my family's safe. So that's my No. 1 concern. It's an unnerving thing, but I just try to make their lives as normal as possible and not bring some of my own stresses home."

A micro approach is one of several methods Peiper suggested to help any athlete, no matter the level of competition, navigate the uncertainty caused by the pandemic. Other coping techniques include open conversations reminding players reasons to be confident in their preparation and affirm that any feelings of frustration or anger are normal; use mindfulness methods such as controlled breathing to improve focus, particularly on game day; cultivating a positive mindset; and creating three-to-five specific process-focused daily goals.

"These are significant topics," added Peiper. "We're talking about people's health and well-being, their families. This isn't just about sports. That's not lost on them, either."

The increasingly compressed schedule – including nine games in 14 days to finish February and a week in March with four road games in three cities – will present significant challenges for physical recovery, which will likely cause General Manager Kevyn Adams to call on reinforcements from the taxi squad or Rochester. But there's no easy solution for the emotional toll this will take on players.

"As a player, sometimes people don't understand that it's not just you show up and play a game at 7 o'clock," said Adams. "There's a lot that goes into it. And we're going to ask a lot of our players, but we're also going to support them. I told the players: We are in this together, and we are going to do everything as a staff, as a coaching staff, our support staff around the team to give them every opportunity to have success. That's all we can do right now."

Inside the NHL: Rapid testing, family spread are the current points of emphasis

By Mike Harrington

The Buffalo News

February 13, 2021

You probably didn't care much about Tuesday's Anaheim-Vegas game or Thursday's rematch. Given the lineup in the East Division this year, you cared a little more about last Sunday's Philadelphia-Washington game.

But you should care big-time about all of them. In terms of navigating a pandemic, the NHL has to learn from them. Just like the league has no choice but to draw better conclusions from what happened to the Sabres and New Jersey Devils.

The only way for the league to get through the pandemic season is to take the time and spend the money for rapid testing on game days. And the new Covid-19 protocols announced last week call for exactly that. Good move, albeit a long overdue one.

Tomas Nosek of the Golden Knights was pulled from Tuesday's game during the second intermission and had a positive Covid result. He was playing in the game – and thus exposing his teammates and opponents – before his test result was determined. That simply can't happen. Before the Flyers' outbreak began in earnest with the likes of Claude Giroux and Jakub Voracek getting added to the Covid list, they played Sunday in Washington after Travis Sanheim reportedly tested positive.

All the Flyers' players, coaches and staff were given rapid tests, tested negative and the game went on. Was that a good decision? Several players have since tested positive but the Capitals entered the weekend with no one on the list, which is very good news. So is the fact no Anaheim players entered Saturday on the list, Nosek was the only Vegas player and the teams played another game Thursday night.

And although it's less clear if they were, in fact, rapid tests because the game was in Canada and the kits are harder to acquire, Thursday's Oilers-Canadiens game in Montreal was delayed an hour to complete testing after Edmonton's Jesse Puljujärvi was placed on the Covid list. No other Habs or Oilers entering Saturday.

All that also adds to the prevailing theory in NHL circles that the Devils brought a variant strain to Buffalo and it's much more transmissible, which is why the Sabres got caught up in the Covid soup. You would think full rapid testing would have signaled issues with New Jersey when it got to town and put a stop to those games, especially since they were matinees and the teams and league were going on test results from the previous day. Live and learn.

Said the league in its announcement Thursday: "Although these tests have a slightly lower ability to detect the presence of Covid-19 than lab-based PCR testing, they will provide prompt, same-day results that will reduce the chance of game participation by individuals who might have active infection."

Amen to that. As for other new protocols, the list is interesting. The point that really jumps out is that the league is clearly concerned about family spread impacting its players in U.S. markets and telling clubs to help facilitate testing if necessary. And consider this paragraph: It's a clear message to players' spouses and partners.

"It is also being strongly recommended that household members (spouses, partners, etc.) limit their discretionary activities outside of the home. Food and grocery delivery services are being recommended to eliminate the need to shop in person, and to thereby reduce interactions with the community. We understand that not all public social interactions can be avoided, such as school-aged children attending school. Other discretionary activities by household members, such as social engagements, however, are to be limited as much as possible."

Teams are also being told KN95 facemasks should be worn at all times they're required and that better masking needs to take place in dressing rooms, including during intermissions. Team meetings must be held virtually. Lounges in hotels must be closed by midnight; something tells me the Tampa Bay Lightning's Super Bowl party in Nashville went past that hour.

Players and their families won't like some of these twists but they're necessary. The NBA just had a long stretch of nearly 800 tests with no positives. The league had 27 positives from Jan. 6-19 and only one since. And it's not

like things are rampant in the NHL, with 34 of the 47 players on the list as of Saturday morning on just three teams (New Jersey, Buffalo and Philadelphia). But the league needed to take more steps before it was too late.

Pens to go truculent?

I'm fascinated to see what goes on in Pittsburgh with Ron Hextall at GM and Brian Burke as the president of hockey operations. It's interesting to note, first of all, how a team with five Stanley Cups hired an experienced GM and still opted to hire a veteran president of hockey ops with a background in the sport.

But it's how Hextall and Burke opt to transform the Penguins that will really be worth watching. Evgeni Malkin is 34, Sidney Crosby and Kris Letang are 33, and the Stanley Cup window is clearly closing. The Pens might be hard-pressed to make the playoffs in the East this year.

What do you do about the core? Does Crosby want to chase more Cups somewhere else or stay for a rebuild? And how do you transform the team's style? Burke gave some insight in a great interview last week with Matt Vensel of the Pittsburgh Post-Gazette.

Burke said he regularly goes back to advice he got as a rookie GM from Islanders legend Bill Torrey, whose club won an NHL-record 19 straight postseason series from 1980-84. That's a record that seems like it will never be broken.

"He said, 'You have to win four [playoff] series. You have to beat four teams,'" Burke said, referencing the number needed to win the Cup. "There are four things you need. Be big enough. Be fast enough. Be skilled enough for special teams. And then just pray and hope it works."

And for those expecting Burke to help Hextall add some of the "truculence" he loves his teams to play with, it sounds like he won't disappoint on that front.

"The last three Stanley Cups were won by big teams (Washington, St. Louis, Tampa Bay). And my teams have always been big. I'd rather beat a team up than get beat up," Burke said. "I'm pretty sure 'Hexy' shares my view, based on how he's drafted. If you have two teams that are equal in skill and one team is bigger, the bigger team is going to win."

KeyBank getting set for fans

In anticipation of inspections by state and local officials prior to the potential admission of fans later this month, the monitors in KeyBank Center concourses and entryways to sections are filled with safety messages that include "Feel ill? Cheer from home" and "Stick Together. Stay within your pod for easier means of physical distancing."

Ropes are also being arranged in front on concession stands on the 100 level. Some of the cardboard cutout fans that have been filling the 200 level appeared on one end of the 100 seats spaced apart, likely to have real fans interspersed between them.

It's going to be good to hear some real cheering, whenever that day comes. The fake noise being piped in is annoying, although the Sabres have stepped things up in recent games with more action-based fan sounds and Sabretooth's drum-led "Let's Go Buffalo" chant.

Lafreniere still at one point

This corner hasn't heard much from Rangers fans lately about No. 1 overall pick Alexis Lafreniere – who still has just one point in his first 13 NHL games. Lafreniere is minus-5 and has had no more than one shot on goal in eight of his games. His point, of course, was the overtime winner here Jan. 28 against the Sabres.

It's a tough league, even for a kid who spent a year with everyone knowing he'd be the top pick. Still, it's not like he's getting rolled when he's out there: Lafreniere is running a 48% Corsi at even strength and the team is just about even (87-86) in shots on goal when he's on the ice.

The No. 1 overall pick should be more productive than that but even guys tagged as stars have learning curves. Jack Hughes had just seven goals and 21 points last year for the Devils but looks to be hugely improved this

season. And remember that the pandemic prevented Lafreniere from having normal summer development camp sessions as well as fall prospect games, a real training camp and NHL exhibitions.

Some underlying signs are good, so it bears watching how Lafreniere looks as the season moves on.

Around the boards

- More Burke: He tweeted thanks for the well-wishes he got for the new gig in Pittsburgh and then pointed out the note he got from Ducks captain Ryan Getzlaf: "Congrats Burkie great to see you back in game. Never were very good on TV anyway!!" Said Burke: "Good to know I'll always have former players who keep me humble."
- Can't possibly be any larger big top in the NHL than the circus that's going on in Columbus. The Pierre-Luc Dubois benching and trade, the NHL completely blowing a replay review and costing the Jackets a goal in what turned into a one-goal loss to Carolina and then the benching of Patrik Laine for reportedly barking at an assistant coach. And don't forget John Tortorella is coaching in the last year of his contract without an extension.

The Jackets hit the weekend 7-5-3 but Tampa Bay, Florida, Carolina and Dallas all had at least three games in hand on them. So their spot in the Central division is tenuous.

- With the NHL and AHL shut down in the fall, St. Joe's product and Avalanche defenseman Dennis Gilbert finished his degree at Notre Dame in the fall. So did Amerks forward Andrew Oglevie and Los Angeles goaltender Cal Petersen, the former Sabres prospect.

Cracked Gilbert on Twitter: "What a journey this has been. Extremely proud to have graduated from such a prestigious university. Can't thank my friends and family enough for their support. Next up is the doctorate. Stay tuned."

Gilbert, who made his NHL debut with the Blackhawks last season, was traded to Colorado in part for former Sabres blueliner Nikita Zadorov. He played one game with Colorado before being sent to the AHL but was recalled to the Avs' taxi squad on Friday.

- Because of border restrictions, the Stockton (Calif.) Heat have moved their season to the Saddledome in Calgary so the Flames are able to have normal player transactions. Somebody in the social media department is having fun. The Twitter feed was dubbed the Stockton (considerably less warm) Heat on Thursday. When it tweeted a picture of a weather app showing the temperature in Calgary at minus-17F, the feed said "We are now the Stockton Cold. Yes we still use Fahrenheit."

Taylor Hall back with Sabres after quarantining as result of positive Covid-19 test

By Lance Lysowski

The Buffalo News

February 13, 2021

Taylor Hall received the news that no player, coach or staff member in the National Hockey League wants to hear during this pandemic-shortened season.

Hall, a 29-year-old former Hart Trophy winner, tested positive for Covid-19 and was added to the protocol list along with defenseman Rasmus Ristolainen when the Sabres were temporarily shut down Feb. 2.

Hall told the media that he was asymptomatic and completed the necessary protocols, including a mandatory quarantine with negative test results, to rejoin the team for practice Saturday.

"No, because I had no symptoms," Hall said when asked if he had any concerns after testing positive. "I wasn't too afraid. I don't have people at-risk living with me or I wasn't around people that are at-risk during the time that I was exposed. I wasn't too worried about it. I know some people can get anxious about that stuff, but for me I was comfortable with it and did my isolation and came out of it fine."

Hall was the first Buffalo player to come off the protocol list. The team is still without Rasmus Dahlin, Dylan Cozens, Curtis Lazar, Casey Mittelstadt, Brandon Montour, Jake McCabe, Tobias Rieder and Rasmus Ristolainen. Coach Ralph Krueger remains absent while recovering from Covid-19. The Sabres have gone five consecutive days without adding a player to the protocol list.

Still shorthanded, the Sabres promoted C.J. Smith, Steven Fogarty and Jacob Bryson from Rochester to the taxi squad. However, the most prominent reinforcement to arrive in time for practice Saturday was Hall, the top free-agent acquisition in October.

Hall successfully completed a rehab skate Friday, but he remained on the protocol list until his official return to team activities. NHL protocols do not allow any player who tested positive to work out at home during the length of quarantine, yet Hall plans to be in the lineup Monday against the New York Islanders in KeyBank Center.

"I plan on playing," said Hall. "I think at this point, whether you play a game or not, your first game back is always going to feel maybe a little bit rusty after time off, but there's no better way to get back into it than to throw yourself in and just play. I think with doctors and the medical staff, we still need to chat a little bit and review some things and all that. But I plan on trying to play on Monday."

Hall wasn't limited during his first practice back. He skated on a forward line with Eric Staal and Sam Reinhart, while Jack Eichel was joined by Jeff Skinner and Victor Olofsson on the top line. The Sabres could be without key defensemen Monday – Bryson, Brandon Davidson and Will Borgen are possible replacements – but Hall provides Buffalo with a consistent scoring threat to round out the top six.

Hall had one goal and eight assists through 10 games, and he plays in the middle on the Sabres' top power-play unit, which has helped Buffalo rank sixth in the NHL on the man advantage. He has scored at least 20 goals six times in his career, including a career-high 39 during his Hart Trophy season with the New Jersey Devils in 2017-18.

The first six games of Hall's time in Buffalo were exceptional, and he formed a dynamic top line with Eichel and Reinhart. However, Hall struggled in his final two games before the pause, particularly the final one against the Devils on Jan. 30. He had a minus-2 rating and three shots on goal in 21:25 of ice time. Twenty-three players from the two teams landed on the Covid protocol list following that game, which was played despite New Jersey having a player added to the list before puck drop. The NHL has since altered its protocols, including the increased use of rapid testing.

"There was some frustrations, for sure, but at the end of the day, we're trying to look forward and do the best we can with the situation we were given," said Hall. "This was everyone's first time going through this and there's going to be mistakes that are not on purpose. We're all trying our best here, and I don't think anyone deserves more blame than anyone else. But it happened. Sometimes situations like that happen for a reason. I think you've seen the protocols that have been put in place around the NHL to make sure this doesn't happen again

and we don't have more postponements. So it's unfortunate we were in the middle of it, but we're going to get through it and we'll be fine."

Hall has gone nine consecutive games without scoring a goal and spent 10 days off the ice. The rules against working out at home during quarantine forced Hall to spend most of his time watching Netflix and playing video games while exchanging text messages with teammates, including a group chat with other Sabres on the Covid protocol list.

Reinforcements arriving allowed the Sabres to conduct more 5-on-5 drills in preparation for the scheduled game against the Islanders. Despite the temporary shutdown, Buffalo entered Saturday only three points behind the Islanders for fourth place in the East Division. It's unclear who will serve as head coach if Krueger cannot return in time, but assistant coach Steve Smith has run practices since the Sabres went back to work Tuesday.

The forward group could feature Smith and Fogarty, both of whom played Friday night for Rochester. Bryson could make his NHL debut after he was paired with Borgen in practice. But the top lines, including Hall's, will be asked to carry Buffalo offensively.

The Sabres have 46 games to play, including their scheduled regular-season finale May 8 in Pittsburgh, and it's yet to be seen how the pause will impact performance. Hall, though, expressed confidence that the Sabres will gain traction once games resume.

"I thought my first six games of the year were very good," said Hall, who signed a one-year, \$8 million contract with Buffalo. "I felt comfortable with how I was playing. The last four, not so great. But I still believe in myself as what I can do and how I can help the team. And I think you see the weapons that you can play with on this team, and that's why I wanted to come play here. So, we're going to get it together as a team. We're still right in the middle of the playoff race that is there for the taking. I'm excited to be back and hopefully we can win some games here pretty quick."

Shorthanded Sabres to receive reinforcements as Covid list remains at 9 players

By Lance Lysowski

The Buffalo News

February 12, 2021

The Buffalo Sabres have held three practices with a shorthanded roster – only 15 skaters and three goalies skated Thursday – since last playing a game Jan. 31.

Yet, barring any disruptions related to Covid-19, the team will host the New York Islanders in KeyBank Center on Monday night.

Four of Buffalo's top defensemen are on the Covid protocol list: Rasmus Dahlin, Rasmus Ristolainen, Jake McCabe and Brandon Montour. Five forwards have also been unavailable: Taylor Hall, Dylan Cozens, Curtis Lazar, Tobias Rieder and Casey Mittelstadt. Coach Ralph Krueger is away from the team while recovering from Covid-19.

It's unclear if any of the above will be able to rejoin the Sabres in time for the scheduled puck drop. Reinforcements are expected to arrive in time for practice Saturday, though, as General Manager Kevyn Adams will recall players from Rochester following the Amerks' game Friday night in Cleveland.

Forwards C.J. Smith, Jean-Sebastien Dea and Arttu Ruotsalainen, and defenseman Jacob Bryson could be among those promoted. In addition to filling out the active roster, the Sabres must also have the minimum four players on the taxi squad.

The Sabres have gone four consecutive days without adding a player to the Covid protocol list, but it's unlikely any of the nine will be able to play against the Islanders if cleared before Monday. After all, none have skated since before the pause Feb. 2.

"I think a lot of it is out of your control," said center Eric Staal. "We did what we were supposed to do and could do and then this happened and it's unfortunate. But you come to work every day to compete and practice and get better. With what we have now, we've been doing that the past couple days. It's felt good and we'll continue to do the same thing building towards Monday and then hopefully getting more guys back as we go and putting this behind us and enjoying the process moving forward. I mean, that's all you can do and for the most part everyone's done that so far."

The Sabres have not played a game since Jan. 31, a matinee that led to the temporary shutdown of their season. Buffalo, still 4-4-2, may have to play 46 games in as few as 86 days, between Monday and its scheduled regular-season finale May 8. The two matchups postponed this week – both against the Washington Capitals – have yet to be rescheduled.

The Sabres played poorly in their final four games before the pause. On one hand, they earned five of a possible eight points against the New York Rangers and New Jersey Devils. However, Buffalo totaled only five even-strength goals during that span and fell apart defensively against the Devils.

The problems will likely be exacerbated if the Sabres must play without Hall, a former Hart Trophy winner widely regarded as one of the top forwards at even strength in the NHL. Lazar and Rieder have scored three goals apiece, tied for second-most on the team, and are key cogs on the penalty kill.

If the four defensemen remain out, the Sabres will likely have Will Borgen and Brandon Davidson make their season debuts. Tague Thompson may also be in the lineup for only the third time in eight games.

The Islanders, meanwhile, have played three games since the Sabres' pause, including regulation wins over the Rangers and Pittsburgh Penguins. Rather than spending time scouting the Islanders, the Buffalo coaching staff had players focus on their own games during the pause by sending out video clips.

"Now we can zero in on the issues we have, the things we've done well and, quite frankly, the first five or six games I felt like we really played well and we didn't get the results we wanted," said assistant coach Steve Smith, who may step in as head coach if Krueger can't return in time for the next game. "So, we did our best to send out video clips that were confirmations of the things that we did well. There was a few learning moments here

and there that we tried to discuss with the players but overall there's been so much positive that we've tried to stick to the positive."

Adams tabbed

Sabres General Manager Kevyn Adams is part of a 10-person advisory group that will assist Chris Drury in selecting the U.S. Men's National Team for the 2021 IIHF World Championship.

Drury, a beloved former Sabres forward who played three memorable seasons in Buffalo 2003-2007, is amid his sixth year in the New York Rangers front office. He serves as associate general manager of the NHL team and general manager of the Rangers' American Hockey League affiliate, the Hartford Wolf Pack.

The event this year is scheduled for May 21 through June 6 in Riga, Latvia.

Adams, who is in his first season leading the Sabres' hockey operations, is joined on the advisory group by John Vanbiesbrouck and eight other active general managers: David Poile, Don Waddell, Stan Bowman, Jeff Gorton, Lou Lamoriello, Bill Guerin, Tom Fitzgerald and Bill Zito.

Sabres GM Kevyn Adams part of advisory group to assist U.S. Men's National Team

By Lance Lysowski
The Buffalo News
February 12, 2021

Sabres General Manager Kevyn Adams is part of a 10-person advisory group that will assist Chris Drury in selecting the U.S. Men's National Team for the 2021 IIHF World Championship.

Drury, a beloved former Sabres forward who played three memorable seasons in Buffalo 2003-07, is amid his sixth year in the New York Rangers front office. He serves as associate general manager of the NHL team and general manager of the Rangers' American Hockey League affiliate, the Hartford Wolf Pack.

Drury served as general manager for the national team in 2019 and was named to the post for 2020 before the tournament was cancelled because of the coronavirus pandemic. The event this year is scheduled for May 21 through June 6 in Riga, Latvia.

Adams, who is amid his first season leading the Sabres' hockey operations, is joined on the advisory group by John Vanbiesbrouck and eight other active general managers: David Poile, Don Waddell, Stan Bowman, Jeff Gorton, Lou Lamoriello, Bill Guerin, Tom Fitzgerald and Bill Zito.

"It's great to have Chris back as the general manager of our men's national team," said Vanbiesbrouck, USA Hockey's assistant executive director of hockey operations. "He's transitioned from his days as a player and emerged as one of the bright young stars on the management side of the game."

Drury was inducted into the U.S. Hockey Hall of Fame in 2015 after a 12-year NHL career that included a Stanley Cup championship with the Colorado Avalanche in 2001. He helped the Sabres reach the Eastern Conference Finals in consecutive years in 2006 and 2007.

Ralph Krueger, Rasmus Dahlin return from NHL COVID-19 Protocols

By Paul Hamilton

WGR 550

February 14, 2021

Buffalo, N.Y. (WGR 550) - The Buffalo Sabres got a nice surprise at practice on Sunday as head coach Ralph Krueger exited the NHL's COVID-19 Protocols and joined practice for a few minutes. After speaking to assistant coach Steve Smith, who ran Sunday's practice, he went up into the stands to sit with assistant coach Don Granato, who they're being cautious with.

Krueger loves being at the rink, and said getting to the arena was a pleasure.

"Just when the players arrived and we passed each other and getting out on the ice for a few minutes, just gives you so much energy back," Krueger said following Sunday's session. "It was outstanding to be back on the ice, be around the players and the staff."

Despite testing positive himself for COVID-19, Krueger is relieved that his wife didn't get the virus.

"I had moderately severe symptoms. I never did end up having a fever, but I did end up with a lot of aches and sleeping and fatigue for more than a week," Krueger said.

The 61-year-old said he is scared by the experience.

Krueger wouldn't say if he'd be behind the bench Monday, when the 2020-21 season resumes, but I know he will be involved in some way, shape or form.

"Today was an excellent day to spend with staff and with players," Krueger said. "I went soft on the ice, but trying to go through a regular day and then we'll see how I feel tomorrow morning."

All of this went down on Jan. 30 and 31 against the New Jersey Devils. Many are blaming the National Hockey League or the Devils for what happened with the COVID-19 outbreak. Krueger has his own thoughts on the matter.

"When you see how many players on both teams were symptomatic and staff members too, we clearly had a rough weekend there," Krueger said. "For me, I like to be constructive and I'm happy the NHL has been constructive as possible in learning from the experiences that we had.

"What happened on that weekend it's quite clear that the information that we had just a few days after and what the NHL had at that point, there was a big divide between what they knew and what they then knew."

If this lineup you see at the bottom of the article is the lineup for Monday, the Sabres would still need to add two players to the taxi squad, in addition to Jacob Bryson and Jonas Johansson. I also wondered if Buffalo gets a player or two off the NHL's COVID-19 Protocols list Monday, could they go straight into the lineup?

"We treat each individual coming back differently, because the symptoms were different with different players," Krueger said. "The timing was different, as to coming into games directly versus coming into practice is certainly a different factor.

"We need to monitor the role of the player in the game. Could we only put that player in for a seven-, eight-, nine-minute stretch to integrate him, or is that worth it or not? We need to be sure we're well-covered on our specialty teams. The penalty killing roll that Tobias Rieder and Curtis Lazar leave open is something we need to fill, so this lineup will be definitely close to what you're going to see tomorrow, but I would expect one or two changes."

OK, I'm willing to speculate. If Krueger is worried about the penalty kill, I'd expect Rasmus Asplund here, and maybe Steven Fogarty would stay on the taxi squad.

The top power play had Sam Reinhart back on it for Rasmus Ristolainen. The second PP featured Kyle Okposo for Dylan Cozens.

Rasmus Dahlin also returned to practice. He was the last player the Sabres had put into COVID-19 protocols. Dahlin said on Sunday he was not sick, and that he was negative from the start.

Dahlin was living with Casey Mittelstadt before they went into quarantine.

"As soon as we got the news from the team, we moved away from each other, so we're not close," Dahlin said.

Nobody has confirmed that Mittelstadt has tested positive, but he is on the NHL's COVID-19 list.

"They put me on the Protocol because I was a close contact, but I tested negative all week, so I'm ready to go," Dahlin said.

Sunday's lines:

Forwards:

Hall – Staal – Reinhart

Smith – Eakin – Okposo

Skinner – Eichel – Olofsson

Thompson – Sheahan – Fogarty

Defense:

Dahlin – Miller (Bryson)

Davidson – Borgen

Irwin – Jokiharju

Taylor Hall returns to practice from NHL's COVID-19 Protocols list

By Paul Hamilton

WGR 550

February 13, 2021

Buffalo, N.Y. (WGR 550) – Taylor Hall got on the ice by himself on Friday, confirming that he was ready to come off the NHL's COVID-19 Protocols list and practice with the team on Saturday.

Hall confirmed that he tested positive for COVID-19, but said he was asymptomatic the whole time. He just needed to wait out the 10 days in quarantine before he could come off the list.

As this was going down, many of the players and staff were worried that they may test positive too. Hall said since he didn't have symptoms, he wasn't worried.

"I wasn't too afraid. I don't have people at risk living with me, and I wasn't around people that are at risk during the time I was exposed," Hall said following Saturday's practice.

"There were some frustrations for sure, but at the end of the day, we're trying to look forward and do the best we can with the situation that we were given."

With nine players and head coach Ralph Krueger in COVID-19 protocols, they wanted to support each other.

"There were lots of guys checking in on me to see how I was doing," Hall said. "A few of us that were on the COVID list had a group chat going, just exchanging how we were feeling."

It seems like a lot of blame for this is being placed on the National Hockey League and the New Jersey Devils. Hall doesn't see it that way.

"This is everybody's first time going through this, and there are going to be mistakes that are not on purpose," Hall said. "We're all trying our best here, and I don't think anyone deserves more blame than anyone else."

Hall intends on being in the Sabres lineup Monday against the New York Islanders. In the NHL, when you test positive, you aren't allowed to do any workouts, so Hall had to sit for a week. He said he still feels good about coming back.

"The first game back, you're always going to feel a little bit rusty after time off," Hall said. "But there's no better way to get back into it than to throw yourself in and just play."

Hall couldn't exercise or leave his home, so he played a lot of Xbox and watched a lot of Netflix.

Hall also thought about the team's 10 games this season. He said for him, it's been up and down.

"I thought my first six games were very good, but the last four not so great," Hall said. "I still believe in myself and how I can help the team, so we're going to get it together as a team."

Before Saturday's practice, the Sabres added Jacob Bryson, C.J. Smith and Steven Fogarty to the taxi squad. Dustin Tokarski was sent to Rochester.

Saturday's lines:

Forwards:

Skinner – Eichel – Olofsson

Hall – Staal – Reinhart

Smith – Eakin – Okposo

Thompson – Sheahan – Fogarty

Defense:

Davidson – Miller

Irwin – Jokiharju

Bryson – Borgen

Steve Smith, once again, ran practice on Saturday, with Don Granato observing from the stands.

'It'll be a big test': Sabres ready to return to play lengthy stretch of games

By John Vogl

The Athletic

February 14, 2021

BUFFALO, N.Y. — With a Sabres logo on his KN95 mask, coach Ralph Krueger skated to center ice during Sunday's practice. It might have been a milestone moment.

Not just because Krueger was back after 10 days in COVID-19 protocols, but also for an additional reason.

"You might have watched your last practice till May," Krueger said.

He followed with a laugh, but he was only half-joking.

After two weeks without a game, the Sabres are ready to drop the puck in KeyBank Center. Then they'll drop it again and again and again.

Buffalo returns Monday with back-to-back games against the New York Islanders, starting a run of six games in nine nights. After a day off, they'll play three games in four days.

On and on it goes, 44 games in 83 days with two outings against Washington still needing to be rescheduled.

"It'll be a big test right off the bat," Krueger said, "but how are we going to manage the spaces in between? I will be very open and honest with you all. We will have chats about that on a daily basis.

"We need to do only one thing, and that's what's best for the team to have a chance to win hockey games. If it means staying off the ice between game days, if it means avoiding the ice completely other than games for certain stretches, that could happen."

If practice makes perfect, the Sabres could be in for a lot of imperfections.

"It's going to be tough, for sure," right wing Kyle Okposo said. "But if you asked any pro athlete, any athlete for that matter, would you rather play or practice? I think 100 percent of them would say play.

"Sure, it's going to be hard on us mentally. It's going to be hard on the bodies, but I'm really looking forward to just playing games and see where we stack up in this division."

Though the Sabres are back, they have no idea when they'll be back at full strength. Defenseman Rasmus Dahlin joined Krueger in exiting COVID-19 protocols Sunday, but forwards Dylan Cozens, Curtis Lazar, Casey Mittelstadt and Tobias Rieder and defensemen Rasmus Ristolainen, Brandon Montour and Jake McCabe remain away from the team.

Ristolainen has been in COVID-19 protocols since Feb. 2, followed by Rieder and Montour (Feb. 3), McCabe (Feb. 4), Cozens and Lazar (Feb. 6) and Mittelstadt (Feb. 7).

"The important thing now, with each of these individuals coming back, is that we treat each one differently because the symptoms were different," Krueger said. "The timing was different. Coming into games directly versus coming into practice is certainly a different factor.

"Could we only put that player in for a seven-, eight-, nine-minute stretch to just kind of integrate him? Is that worth it or not? So, there's a lot of discussions that we're going to have here."

Based on that, it's doubtful any of the seven protocol players would face the Islanders even if they were cleared before the game. Among the Sabres who practiced Sunday and could play New York:

- Defenseman Jacob Bryson, who's never played an NHL game.
- Left wing C.J. Smith, who hasn't skated for the Sabres since Feb. 21, 2019.

- Defenseman Will Borgen, who has played four NHL games and none since March 31, 2019.
- Right wing Steven Fogarty, who would be making his Sabres debut after playing 18 games in three seasons with the Rangers.
- Defenseman Brandon Davidson, who would also make his Buffalo debut following seven games with Calgary last year.

"Everyone's got a role to play," right wing Sam Reinhart said. "There's a lot of bodies that have the opportunity to show what they can bring. We've all really appreciated and liked what we've seen from the taxi squad and, obviously, the guys going up and down (from the minors) all year.

"From my standpoint, it's some excitement to see what they can bring."

With a normal schedule, Krueger and the coaching staff would ride the top players while limiting the minutes of inexperienced skaters. But it would be extremely taxing for Jack Eichel to play 25 minutes six times in nine nights.

The captain might welcome it, though.

"This is what you prepare all summer for," Eichel said. "I always feel better the more I'm playing. The more games we play, the more times I'm on the ice, that's when I start to do my best."

His coach was not at his best while sidelined with a confirmed case of COVID-19. Krueger said he had "moderately severe" symptoms, specifically body aches and fatigue that lasted more than a week.

"Definitely time to realize how lethal this COVID is," Krueger said, adding he was "scarred by the experience and grateful to be one of the people coming out of it.

"I really pay my respect to the people working in medical care and then for the many families that didn't have success dealing with it the way I have. Our medical team has been amazing in the support. My wife didn't get it, which is a bit of a miracle in itself."

Dahlin said he tested negative from the outset but spent six days in protocols as a close contact. Forward Taylor Hall returned Saturday after 11 days as asymptomatic positive.

The Sabres' outbreak occurred following the Jan. 30 and 31 meetings with New Jersey. The Devils had players enter protocols before and during the trip to Buffalo and wound up with 18 players on the list. Two linesmen who worked the games also went into COVID-19 protocols, as did an unknown number of Sabres staffers.

"We clearly had a rough weekend there," Krueger said. "But for me, I like to be constructive, and I'm happy the NHL has been as constructive as possible in learning from the experience that we had."

"There was some frustrations, for sure," Hall said, "but at the end of the day, we're trying to look forward and do the best we can with the situation we were given."

When the Sabres look ahead, they see games. Lots and lots of games.

"It's a really tight division with a lot of good hockey teams, and we're going to play them it seems like almost every night, so it's going to be great," Eichel said. "The more games, the merrier."

Rasmus Dahlin's woes, Casey Mittelstadt's trade value and more: Sabres mailbag

By John Vogl

The Athletic

February 12, 2021

Let's see, the Sabres' opening month featured a .500 record, a high-scoring power play, no goals by Jeff Skinner, a sizzling start by Rasmus Ristolainen, a benching of Rasmus Dahlin ...

And a COVID-19 shutdown. That seemed preventable.

There's a lot to talk about in the Mailbag.

Some questions have been lightly edited for clarity.

Alex K.: How much wiggle room, if any, is left in the schedule?

Picture Zdeno Chara in a medium sweater.

The Sabres are set to squeeze 44 games into 83 days, which works out to one game every 1.9 days. Plus, this week's two postponements with Washington still need to be added. The NHL could tack them on after May 8 or rearrange everything.

Again.

"You guys saw what happened with the four games that were originally postponed," Sabres general manager Kevyn Adams said. "It's not as simple as just plugging four games in. It completely changed the schedule."

A dozen games moved around, resulting in five additional back-to-backs. If the NHL doesn't add games between May 8 and the May 11 start to the playoffs, then the Sabres' average of playing every 1.9 days will shrink to 1.8.

If shutdowns continue around the league, trimming the 56-game schedule seems inevitable.

"It's critical that they feel the integrity of this season is there, so that's not been brought up to myself or any anyone else in our organization about anything different than 56 games," Adams said.

Robert L.: John, holy hell man, this season is...something. Poop mountain. Any way you slice it, it's not going well so far. I'm sure Gary Bettman and the owners are gonna get this season across the finish line one way or the other. Do you envision any type of temporary leaguewide stoppage at some point if they can't get a handle on these teamwide outbreaks?

If they continue to patch leaks and ignore where the water is coming from, this is going to happen.

It's mind-boggling that they've banked the whole season on the belief that COVID-19 can't be transmitted on the ice. No "definitive proof," according to the NHL and the NHLPA. As if wearing a blue jersey while the other team dons red means you're safe.

If the samples the league has sent to the Mayo Clinic show cross-team transmission, they may have to pause to reexamine things. The 213 pages of protocols do a solid job of limiting outbreaks within a team, but they do nothing to stop New Jersey from giving it to Buffalo.

That shunning of scientific common sense has also put officials at risk. The two linesmen who worked the Devils-Sabres series entered COVID-19 protocols, which brings up another thing that will have to change. While teams are sticking in their same division this season, the referees and linesmen are flying across the country to work everywhere. That was fine under the belief that games don't cause spread, but once proved otherwise, it can't continue.

So, yes, I can see a pause coming once on-ice transmission is shown.

Chris D.: This roster has more talent on it and, in many regards, is playing more structurally sound than it has in a very long time. The team is a perfect .500 with a 4-4-2 record, a hair short of .500 last season at 30-31-8, and Ralph Krueger as a head coach in the NHL is just .484. A .500 club isn't going to get you into the playoffs.

The last thing we need is another change in the organization, but as a fan, I do have to ask at what point, if there are not improvements, does that conversation need to start to happen?

The main fault I see with Krueger this season is the focus on defense. This team has seven skaters drafted in the top seven picks. You don't get selected that high because you defend well in the neutral zone. It's because you have hockey skills that are better than everyone in the world at your age.

I understand the theory that defense leads to offense. I know coaches would rather win 3-1 than 6-5. But if you have the skills to put up six, go for it.

Putting that aside, I don't see a wholesale change this year. Maybe new assistant coaches if the Sabres don't make or contend for the playoffs, but Krueger figures to be back in 2021-22 unless the wheels completely fall off.

Scott H.: Will the Sabres ever be relevant in the NHL?

They were scheduled to have seven national broadcasts on NBC and NBCSN this season, among the most in the league. They're relevant in terms of ratings.

Connor H.: Linus Weissbach is really turning some heads at Wisconsin this year. Any read on the Sabres' plans for him or will this be another Cal Petersen situation?

Weissbach has indeed stood out as a senior, putting up eight goals and 26 points through 20 games. As a junior, he had four goals and 22 points in 35 games.

I put the question to Kris Baker, better known as SabresProspects.

"It's a reasonable thought that he could exercise his free agent rights," Baker said of the 2017 seventh-round pick. "He also has potential to play professionally in Sweden. I think his game is constructed well for big Swedish ice. Decent player who's finally breaking out, but I personally would not see it as a big loss if he opted out of Buffalo."

Blake M.: Hey John, seems like the Sabres just don't want to give up on Casey Mittelstadt. What is your opinion on what they should do with him and if they should look to trade him? Also, what is your opinion on Curtis Lazar so far this season?

It's too early to give up on Mittelstadt. I continually think back to my Mittelstadt-Olli Jokinen story from 2019. But I also look at Mittelstadt's draft class in 2017.

Sure, there are breakout players such as Cale Makar, Elias Pettersson, Nico Hischier and Miro Heiskanen. But Nick Suzuki is just coming into his own. Robert Thomas, Kailer Yamamoto, Alexandre Texier, Filip Chytil and Cody Glass have been up and down. Plenty of players haven't even been up yet.

Mittelstadt would be facing Weissbach in college games in an alternate universe. He'll still be 22 when next season starts. If the Sabres see potential, they should give him more time. If they have legitimate doubts, though, they should move on before it's too late.

As for Lazar, he's what you want in a bottom-six center. He's popped in three goals, helped the penalty kill move into the top half of the league and is a well-liked guy in the room.

Colin A.: If we show promise and good results but still fall out of playoffs, do you see Taylor Hall signing with us again? If he continues his current goal and point production, do you think the Sabres would even extend him a contract?

For the shortened season, it made sense for Hall to sidle up to Jack Eichel and stay close to his Toronto home. The \$8 million sure didn't hurt.

But he'll turn 30 next season. His chances at big, long-term paydays are dwindling. I think Hall focuses more on that this offseason.

There is a chance that's in Buffalo. The Sabres will have cap room. I hate to wimp out on your question, but it's still too early to tell Hall's future, other than a long-term contract will be essential.

John P.: Do you think the Sabres will sell out at 10% capacity with the price they'll charge for tickets (especially with having to pay for a test)?

Some games will sell out, but I don't think they all will. You nailed a big reason.

For years, fans have been able to head to StubHub at 4 p.m., plop down \$10 and be in the arena three hours later. Tickets will now be full price, plus the additional cost for a test. Bills fans paid \$63 per ticket for tests for the playoff games.

Will nearly 2,000 fans want to drop \$400 to see the Islanders on consecutive nights? Probably not. But I'm sure there are 1,907 folks out there willing to spend \$200 for Sidney Crosby on a Saturday afternoon.

Bill S.: John, a COVID-19 broadcasting question. Watching the games on MSG, it appears that Brian Duff, Marty Biron, Dan Dunleavy and Rob Ray are all on location at Key Bank Center. I have not seen Rick Jeanneret on camera for the games that I have watched. Is he broadcasting from home in Ontario? Has he relocated and moved to Western New York for the season? Or has the Canadian government deemed him an "essential" worker, allowing him to cross the border for each game without quarantining for 14 days?

Jeanneret has indeed been in the KeyBank Center press box for home games. He and other media personnel are permitted to travel across the border on a daily basis as essential workers. The big change for Rick is the Sabres had been supplying a car service in recent years, but he has to drive himself back and forth from his Ontario home because of travel restrictions.

Timothy S.: Will Skinner ever get an extended look on a top line? Does he deserve it? Is he unlucky or is he not playing well?

Marshal S.: Is Rasmus Dahlin still supposed to be a "generational" talent? I know he's young, but I look around the league and see all these other guys finding a ton of success. He's definitely good but extremely underwhelming. Or maybe it was just because of the hype?

Todd A.: Is Ralph ruining Skinner and Dahlin?

The most disappointing player has been Dahlin. The most disappointing stat line is no goals in 10 games for Skinner.

Is it Krueger's fault? Skinner would look better playing 16 minutes next to Eichel than 12 minutes with Lazar. And Dahlin got so caught up in defensive principles that he forgot how to skate with the puck.

But it's not Krueger's fault that Skinner is fifth on the team in shots and 22nd in goals. It's not the coach's fault the Sabres have allowed 24 even-strength goals and Dahlin has been on the ice for 12.

There's work to be done by all involved.

Joseph I.: Do you see an opportunity for the team to make a significant trade in the top six forward ranks?

I don't think that's where the problems are. With Eichel, Hall, Skinner, Sam Reinhart, Victor Olofsson, Eric Staal and Dylan Cozens, the Sabres can assemble a solid top six. They just need to find the net more.

Fletcher D.: The Sabres strengthened their forward group in the offseason. Where is the biggest hole on the defensive side?

We've mentioned Dahlin's goal problems. Colin Miller and Brandon Montour haven't been much better, each pulling 10 pucks out of the net. Henri Jokiharju has been getting buried.

Ristolainen and Jake McCabe have been a true No. 1 pair so far, but the other two units haven't excelled offensively or defensively. Will Borgen will get a chance simply due to COVID-19 protocol absences. Jacob Bryson would be next in line. Mattias Samuelsson and Oskari Laaksonen aren't ready.

If four of the top six continue to falter and Borgen or Bryson can't fill holes, a trade will be necessary.

Patrick H.: How come there are no Sabres podcasts at The Athletic?

The first reason is I'm a better writer than talker.

The second is time. There are 12 team-focused and five national podcasts at The Athletic. Anything else you see from my hockey co-workers is self-created. They line up sponsors, guests and equipment.

As previously mentioned, the Sabres are set to play every 1.9 days. Plus, I'm checking to see if their league is using people as ingredients in COVID-19 soup. This isn't the best year for me to hunt down sponsors, guests and equipment.

I have appeared recently on "The Athletic Hockey Show." And my great friend Tim Graham runs a podcast with me as an occasional guest. That'll have to do for now.

Garry M.: How much of the decision to go with Carter Hutton is driven by his contract? What's the general reluctance to roll the dice on a rookie in net? Other NHL teams like the Flyers have tried it. We all know Tom Barrasso was 18.

Ukko-Pekka Luukkonen is no Tom Barrasso, who won the Vezina and Calder trophies with the Sabres in 1984.

Aside from that, Hutton's contract is why he entered the year in Buffalo's top two. His play has kept him there. He certainly hasn't been Barrasso, but he's been better than the previous two seasons.

Tim O.: When will the Sabres change the seats in the arena? It looks like garbage in there. Switch now so maybe we can sit in them next year?

Hockey fans just ranked the arena 30th out of 31. People who scrape crud off their seats know why.

It would have made sense to make changes during the long shutdown from March to January. But something big lurked in the background: the study the Pegulas commissioned regarding Bills Stadium, KeyBank Center and whether they should be renovated or replaced.

The results are in, but Pegula Sports and Entertainment hasn't shared them. Plus, the organization will want financial help from the state. A pandemic is not the best time to ask for money.

Dirty blue seats and cracked green floors will remain for now.

Colin D.: Who are your ideal Amerks linemates for Jack Quinn to have the most success? Do you think they throw him right onto the top six or try and limit his usage?

Center Arttu Ruotsalainen is a left-handed shot, so he could use his forehand to find Quinn on the right side. Big left winger Brett Murray could watch out for both of them and show if he has more to give offensively.

There's no guarantee Quinn will stay with the Amerks – he'll have to go back to the Ontario Hockey League if it starts or be rushed to Buffalo – so Rochester may as well give him all the minutes it can.

André J.: Hey John, thanks for doing this! Risto seems to have finally put the pieces together this season to be a good defenseman. What exactly is different from years past? Also, do you think he likes it at all in Buffalo or is he looking forward to hitting UFA and bolting? Also, what do you think of his new, menacing beard? 10/10 from me, for sure.

The whole look screams "bad ass."

And that's exactly how he's been playing. Ristolainen has always liked to hit. Now he knows what to do after hitting people. Instead of knocking them down, watching the puck go to an open guy and getting blinded by the goal light, Ristolainen is creating turnovers with his checks and forcing players off the puck, then getting in position.

Ristolainen set a career high with 235 hits in 2018-19. He's on pace to put up 287 in an 82-game season this year.

The defenseman had 276 giveaways during his first seven seasons. He has two this year.

Ristolainen is scoring on 10 percent of his shots. He has four power-play points after totaling nine last season. He's also getting help from McCabe's improved play.

Ristolainen, who has another full season before hitting free agency, has really been the team's most valuable player so far.

He's also in COVID-19 protocols, a reminder of what type of season this has been.

Ralph Krueger returns to Sabres: ‘Time to realize how lethal this COVID is’

By Bill Hoppe
Olean Times Herald
February 15, 2021

BUFFALO – Ralph Krueger only stayed on the ice about 15 minutes. After the Sabres coach chatted with several players and exchanged some fist-bumps, he left and watched Sunday’s practice from the KeyBank Center stands.

But just having an opportunity to touch the ice for a spell and enjoy some brief interactions helped recharge Krueger, who tested positive for COVID-19 on Feb. 4.

“Just this morning, when the players arrived and we passed each other, and getting out on the ice for a few minutes gives you so much energy back,” Krueger said on a Zoom call following the session. “You know why you’re here. You love the group you’re working with and the potential of the group and the individuals. ...

“It was outstanding to be back on the ice, to be around the players and the staff. ... I get a surge of energy right now just even talking about it.”

Sabres defenseman Rasmus Dahlin joined Krueger, who sported a large N95 mask, on the ice. The NHL placed Dahlin on the COVID-19 protocol-related absences list Monday.

The Swede said he did not test positive and quarantined because of a possible exposure. His roommate, Sabres forward Casey Mittelstadt, is on the absences list.

Dahlin, who plans to play tonight against the New York Islanders, said he and Mittelstadt have been separated.

“I just stayed in shape, worked out just to keep up with the other guys and be ready for the game,” Dahlin said of his time at home.

So far, the NHL has removed two Sabres players on the absences list. Seven are still on it.

Winger Taylor Hall practiced the last two days and also plans to play tonight, the Sabres’ first game since Jan. 31. Hall said he tested positive but was asymptomatic.

Meanwhile, Krueger, 61, said he wants to gauge how he feels this morning before deciding whether he’ll step behind the bench tonight. If he can’t coach, assistant Steve Smith, who has been running the practices for Krueger, will lead the Sabres.

“I’m definitely feeling better,” Krueger said. “I had moderately severe symptoms. I never did end up having a fever, but I did end up with a lot of aches and sleeping and fatigue for more than a week. Definitely time to realize how lethal this COVID is. Everyone knows I try to keep myself in good shape and manage that part of my life. (I’m) just really pleased in the last few days to get back to feeling more normal. I’ll take it a day at a time.

“Today was an excellent day to spend with the staff and with the players. I went soft on the ice, but otherwise, really trying to go through a regular day.”

Krueger said he’s grateful his wife, Glenda, did not test positive for COVID-19.

“A bit of a miracle in itself,” he said.

Krueger said he’s “scarred by the experience” of having COVID.

“Grateful to be one of the people coming out of it by the looks of it,” he said. “And really pay my respects to the people working in the medical care, and then for the many families who didn’t have success in dealing with it the way I have. Our medical team has been amazing in the support.”

Krueger, like his players and general manager Kevyn Adams, refused to blame anyone for the Sabres’ COVID problems.

The Sabres haven't played since their two-game set against the New Jersey Devils on Jan. 30 and 31.

The Devils started the series with five players on the absences list. The NHL added a sixth before the second meeting, yet the game was played. The Devils' absences ballooned to a stunning 19 later in the week.

The NHL postponed four Sabres games on Feb. 2, the same day it placed Hall and defenseman Rasmus Ristolainen on the absences list.

The league instituted a slew of new COVID protocols Thursday.

"I'm happy the NHL has been as constructive as possible in learning from the experience that we had," Krueger said. "So it seems to make it worthwhile. ... We feel the new protocols ... are protecting the athletes and the staff members. They are protecting the game that we could carry it out through the rest of the season.

"What happened on that weekend, obviously, it's quite clear the information that we had just a few days after and what the NHL had at that point, there was a big divide between what they knew and what they then knew. What happened, I think that's been chewed on all levels. For us, it's really what is the reaction? And the reaction has been strong and supportive and constructive. We can now concentrate on getting the season started again."

Sabres will likely field lineup with C.J. Smith, other taxi-squad players

By Bill Hoppe

Olean Times Herald

February 15, 2021

BUFFALO – Having seven players on the NHL's COVID-19 protocol-related absences list means the Sabres must utilize their taxi squad to dress a full lineup tonight.

So defensemen Will Borgen and Brandon Davidson and wingers Steven Fogarty and C.J. Smith could all be thrust into action against the New York Islanders at KeyBank Center.

Borgen and Davidson have spent the entire season on the taxi squad. They haven't played a game at any level since March 11. The Sabres recalled Fogarty and Smith from the Rochester Americans on Saturday.

Coach Ralph Krueger said the forward lines and defense pairs the Sabres showcased during Sunday's practice "will be definitely close to what you see" tonight.

"I would still expect some potential one or two changes with that," Krueger said on a Zoom call following practice.

Does that mean a player or two could be removed from the absences list? Stay tuned. Whatever the case, at least two Sabres will likely be making their season debuts.

"Everyone's got a role to play, a role to fill," Sabres winger Sam Reinhart said. "So I think there's a lot of bodies that have the opportunity to show what they can bring. We've all really appreciated and liked what we've seen from the taxi squad and also the guys going up and down all year.

"From my standpoint, (there's) some excitement to see what they can bring as well."

Borgen and Davidson practiced as the Sabres' third defense pair Sunday. Smith skated at left wing beside center Cody Eakin and Kyle Okposo on the fourth line. Fogarty, the Amerks' captain, skated at right wing with center Riley Sheahan and Tage Thompson.

After a 15-day gap between games, the Sabres play four times in the next six days. Right now, they have to play 46 games – two must be rescheduled – over an 82-day stretch to close the season.

"You might've watched your last practice until May," Krueger joked. "I mean, we need to really, really feel the group. ... Our brainstorming moving forward is to manage the energy."

That means the Sabres could use taxi-squad players as fresh reinforcements when they have a healthy lineup.

Krueger knows he can't run his best players ragged.

"We need to especially monitor the high-minute guys," he said. "We need to do only one thing, and that's what's best for the team the team to win hockey games. If it means staying off the ice between games days, if it means almost avoiding ice completely other than games for certain stretches, that could happen.

"Sports science has never quite as an important role as right now as we can monitor any piece of information we can get on the guys and then work with them accordingly between the game."

Teams coming off even a short breaks usually have trouble handling opponents that have been playing regularly.

The Islanders have played four time as the Sabres sat idle, winning three times. They execute a rigid system under coach Barry Trotz.

"We're playing a team as dedicated to the way it plays in the Islanders in our division," Krueger said. "They are definitely finding their A game at the moment."

Notes: Sabres defenseman Rasmus Dahlin, who was removed from the absences list Sunday, practiced with Colin Miller. ... Jeff Skinner spent the weekend skating at left wing beside top center Jack Eichel and Victor Olofsson. ... Prospect Jacob Bryson was the Sabres' extra defenseman Sunday.

Sabres coach Ralph Krueger, Rasmus Dahlin return to practice

By Bill Hoppe

Olean Times Herald

February 14, 2021

BUFFALO – Sabres coach Ralph Krueger and defenseman Rasmus Dahlin returned to practice this morning following COVID-19-related absences.

Krueger, who tested positive for COVID-19 on Feb. 4, is wearing an N95 mask and has been skating around the KeyBank Center ice talking to some players. Assistant coach Steve Smith is still leading the session.

Update: Krueger left the ice after about 15 minutes.

Post-practice update: Krueger said he will see how he feels Monday morning before deciding if he will be behind the bench later in the day against the New York Islanders.

"I'm definitely feeling better," Krueger said on a Zoom call following practice. "I had moderately severe symptoms. I never did end up having a fever, but I did end up with a lot of aches and sleeping and fatigue for more than a week. Definitely time to realize how lethal this COVID is. Everyone knows I try to keep myself in good shape and manage that part of my life. (I'm) just really pleased in the last few days to get back to feeling more normal. I'll take it a day at a time.

"Today was an excellent day to spend with the staff and with the players. I went soft on the ice, but otherwise, really trying to go through a regular day."

Meanwhile, Dahlin said he tested "negative from the beginning."

"I've been on the protocol (list), just trying to stay away and keep the things I have to do and get ready for the game tomorrow," Dahlin said. "That's all I can do."

Dahlin was added to the NHL's COVID-19 protocol-related absences list six days ago. The Swede is the second Sabres player to return from the absences list. Winger Taylor Hall practiced Saturday.

Seven Sabres are still on the absences list. The Sabres host the New York Islanders on Monday.

Sabres' Taylor Hall felt asymptomatic after positive COVID-19 test

By Bill Hoppe
Olean Times Herald
February 14, 2021

BUFFALO – Taylor Hall knows he'll feel a little rusty. The winger had to complete a mandatory 10-day quarantine after testing positive for COVID-19. He returned to practice Saturday, giving him just two sessions to prepare for the Sabres' next game.

Still, Hall, who said he was asymptomatic, plans to play in Monday's home game against the New York Islanders.

"There's no better way to get back into it than to throw yourself in and just play," Hall said on a Zoom call following practice inside KeyBank Center. "I think with doctors and the medical staff we still need to chat a little bit and review some things and all that. But I plan on trying to play on Monday."

Hall, 29, is Buffalo's first player to clear the necessary hurdles and return from the NHL's COVID-19 protocol-related absences list. Eight Sabres remain on it. Hall and defensemen Rasmus Ristolainen were the first Sabres placed on the list Feb. 2. The league also postponed four Sabres games that day.

Hall said he wasn't worried after he tested positive for COVID because he never experienced any symptoms.

"I don't have people at-risk living with me or I wasn't around people that are at-risk during the time that I was exposed," he said. "I wasn't too worried about it. I know some people can get anxious about that stuff, but for me, I was comfortable with it and did my isolation and came out of it fine."

The Sabres' COVID problems began following their two-game set against Hall's old team, the New Jersey Devils, on Jan. 30 and 31.

The Devils started the series with five players on the absences list. The NHL added a sixth before the second meeting, yet the game was played. The Devils' absences ballooned to a stunning 19 later in the week.

While Hall acknowledged "some frustrations," he refused to blame anyone for the Sabres' scary COVID situation.

"At the end of the day, we're trying to look forward and do the best we can with the situation we were given," he said. "This was everyone's first time going through this and there's going to be mistakes that are not on purpose. We're all trying our best here, and I don't think anyone deserves more blame than anyone else."

"But it happened. Sometimes situations like that happen for a reason. I think you've seen the protocols that have been put in place around the NHL to make sure this doesn't happen again and we don't have more postponements. So it's unfortunate we were in the middle of it, but we're going to get through it and we'll be fine."

The NHL added a slew of new COVID protocols on Thursday, including POC (point of care testing) for U.S.-based teams.

Hall said he occupied most of his time at home watching Netflix and playing Xbox. Players in protocol aren't allowed to work out. He and the other Sabres on the absences list also had a text group.

"It's tough to quarantine for that long but the days go by slow but fast at the same time," said Hall, who signed a one-year, \$8 million contract to join Buffalo. "Like, they just kind blend together."

Hall said he skated once on his own before spending Saturday's practice at left wing beside center Eric Staal and Sam Reinhart.

While Hall has registered nine points in 10 outings, he has scored just once, on opening night Jan. 14.

"It's been a while since I scored," he said. "I thought my first six games of the year were very good. I felt comfortable with how I was playing. The last four, not so great. But I still believe in myself as what I can do and

how I can help the team. And I think you see the weapons that you can play with on this team, and that's why I wanted to come play here.

"So we're going to get it together as a team. We're still right in the middle of the playoff race that is there for the taking."

Taylor Hall returns to practice; Sabres add three players from Amerks

By Bill Hoppe

Olean Times Herald

February 13, 2021

BUFFALO – Winger Taylor Hall, who was added to the NHL's COVID-19 protocol-related absences list on Feb. 2, is practicing with the Sabres this morning inside KeyBank Center.

The Sabres still have eight players in the league's COVID protocol. They're scheduled to host the New York Islanders on Monday.

Hall, 29, is practicing at left wing beside center Eric Staal and Sam Reinhart. Jeff Skinner, meanwhile, is at left wing with top center Jack Eichel and Victor Olofsson.

Update: Hall said he tested positive for COVID-19 but was asymptomatic. He plans to play Monday.

Hall said he wasn't concerned because he never experienced symptoms.

"I don't have people at-risk living with me or I wasn't around people that are at-risk during the time that I was exposed," he said on a Zoom call following practice. "I wasn't too worried about it. I know some people can get anxious about that stuff, but for me, I was comfortable with it and did my isolation and came out of it fine."

The Sabres also added three new players this morning, recalling defenseman Jacob Bryson and forwards Steven Fogarty and C.J. Smith from the Rochester Americans to the taxi squad. They also sent goalie Dustin Tokarski back to the Amerks.

The three recalls played in the Amerks' 7-3 road win against the Cleveland Monsters on Friday. Smith scored two goals and three points.

Twenty-one players are practicing today. Stayed tuned for more updates.

Update: The Sabres used the other following lines and defense pairs today:

- Smith, Cody Eakin and Kyle Okposo
- Tage Thompson, Riley Sheahan and Fogarty
- Matt Irwin and Henri Jokiharju
- Brandon Davidson and Colin Miller
- Bryson and Will Borgen

Sabres' Jack Eichel confident he will play better: 'Going to start to take off'

By Bill Hoppe

Olean Times Herald

February 13, 2021

BUFFALO – Following nearly a 10-month break, an upper-body injury forced captain Jack Eichel to wait an extra five days to join training camp. Then after having barely a week of practice, the Sabres began a dizzying run of 10 games over 18 days.

So when the Sabres started an eight-day COVID-19 pause last week, Eichel, 24, used the unexpected break as an opportunity to let his body recover and examine his game.

"It took a little bit of time for myself at least to get my legs under me during the season," Eichel said on a Zoom call following Wednesday's practice inside KeyBank Center. "There's no preseason games. Camp was quick."

He added: "Maybe (the break) was a little bit of a blessing in disguise. It gave me a chance to start feeling good again."

Eichel has enjoyed a solid start, at least on paper, registering a team-high 11 points. But the ultra-talented center has scored only two goals and mustered just one goal and four points at even strength.

Last season, he recorded a career-high 15.9 shooting percentage. This year, that number has dropped to 5.1.

"A little bit of a slow start for me," Eichel acknowledged. "Not really where I want to be. But I feel like I've definitely taken advantage of these two weeks in trying to prepare myself to have a successful next 46 games."

The Sabres sorely need Eichel to be their offensive catalyst, especially with nine players on the NHL's COVID-19 protocol-related absences list. Last season, his dynamic play generated MVP chatter and earned him his third consecutive NHL All-Star Game appearance. Despite a late slump, he scored 36 goals and 78 points in 68 games.

"This is an opportunity as a leader to step up and take on a bigger role if we're missing guys, you never know what's going to happen," Eichel said.

So during the recent break, Eichel studied video of games from last season.

"See what I was doing then, and see what was working and sort of touch it and compare it to some things early in the season here," he said.

Eichel said he wants "to get back to attacking the game."

"I started doing a little bit better those last two games against Jersey," he said.

He added: "I'm really excited to get the season going again. I think I'm going to start to take off hopefully."

A 10-game sample size, of course, is small. Still, Eichel hasn't showcased much five-on-five chemistry beside Taylor Hall, the left winger the Sabres signed to flank him. They've combined on just two even-strength goals.

"As I envisioned with the signing of Hall ... there would be a feeling-out process," said a scout who has watched Eichel throughout his career. "I believe that is still happening five-on-five. They both want to have the puck coming up ice. That is something they will have to figure out. They have found some chemistry on the power play, no doubt."

He added: "For the team to be successful, (Eichel) needs to be one of the best players on a consistent basis. Great players find a way no matter what the circumstances. We all know there has been plenty of different circumstances this year."

The Sabres, who had Friday off, plan to practice today. They're scheduled to host the New York Islanders on Monday, their first game since Jan. 31 against the New Jersey Devils.

—

Sabres general manager Kevyn Adams has been named to USA Hockey's advisory board for this year's World Championship. Former Sabres co-captain Chris Drury is USA's GM.

Sabres send C.J. Smith to Amerks, recall goalie again

By Bill Hoppe

Olean Times Herald

February 12, 2021

The Buffalo Sabres assigned forward C.J. Smith from the taxi squad to the Rochester Americans this afternoon and recalled goalie Dustin Tokarski to the taxi squad.

This is the third straight day Smith and Tokarski have been involved in transactions.

The Sabres likely sent Smith, 26, to the Amerks so he can play in tonight's road game against the Cleveland Monsters. They assigned him to the AHL on Wednesday, and he recorded an assist in his season debut, a 4-3 overtime win against the Syracuse Crunch.

Smith practiced Thursday in Buffalo after the Sabres recalled him. It seems likely the Sabres, who have nine players on the NHL's COVID-19 protocol-related absences list, will summon him again this weekend.

The Sabres have today off.

By recalling Tokarski, the Sabres keep the minimum four players on the taxi squad.

Sabres head coach Ralph Krueger back at practice after COVID-19 battle; Dahlin off COVID-19 list

By Paul Ross

WKBW

February 14, 2021

BUFFALO, N.Y. (WKBW) — Buffalo Sabres head coach Ralph Krueger was back at practice on Sunday after his battle with COVID-19, along with defenseman Rasmus Dahlin who was taken off the COVID-19 list.

The Sabres announced on Thursday, February 4th that Krueger tested positive for COVID-19.

Dahlin was added to the COVID-19 list on Sunday, February 8th, and was the second player taken off the list, after Taylor Hall was taken off the list on Saturday.

The Sabres are scheduled to play their first game since January 31st on Monday against the New York Islanders.

Sabres' Taylor Hall happy to be back after testing positive for COVID-19

By Jenna Callari

WKBW

February 13, 2021

BUFFALO, NY (WKBW) — The Buffalo Sabres have taken another step in the right direction, welcoming back their first of nine players from the COVID-19 protocol list.

Forward Taylor Hall was one of the first names put on the list back on February 2nd and after quarantining for 10 days and completing a rehab skate on Friday, Hall was cleared to rejoin the team for their practice on Saturday.

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"It's always fun to be back and have that camaraderie," Hall said about his first practice back. "It's something you miss when you're gone for sure."

Hall confirmed he tested positive for COVID-19 but was asymptomatic. Per league rules he wasn't able to work out at home while on the COVID-19 protocol list but following his first day back, he plans to play in the team's game on Monday.

"Your first game back is always going to feel a little bit rusty after some time off. But there's no better way to get back into it than to throw yourself in and just play," Hall said. "I think with the doctors and the medical staff, we still need to chat a little bit. I'm just gonna go out and play and see what happens."

Hall skated on a line alongside Eric Staal and Sam Reinhart and seemed to have no issue keeping up with his teammates. He was on the bench laughing and chatting with the guys he hasn't seen in nearly two weeks. They're the same guys who continued to check in on him and the others while things were on pause.

"We're all going through this for the first time so you never know if a guy is going to have those flu-like symptoms or if he's gonna be feeling just fine so you reach out to everyone," Hall said about the team keeping in touch. "A few of us that were on the COVID list, we were just chatting, had a group chat going, and just exchanging how we were feeling."

While Hall has been cleared to come back, eight players [Dylan Cozens, Rasmus Dahlin, Curtis Lazar, Jake McCabe, Casey Mittelstadt, Brandon Montour, Tobias Rieder, and Rasmus Ristolainen] are still on the COVID protocol list along with head coach Ralph Krueger who did test positive and is showing symptoms.

The team called up several taxi squad members [C.J. Smith, Jacob Bryson, and Steven Fogarty] to fill the team's lines during Saturday's practice. Hall believes this is a step in the right direction, despite the initial frustrations.

"This is everyone's first time going through this. We're all trying our best here," Hall said. "It's unfortunate we were in the middle of it but we'll get through it and we'll be fine."

The Sabres will finally play their first game on Monday, February 15th following their shutdown. The Sabres are currently 4-4-2 and are last in the East Division standings [10 points], thanks in part to their lack of time on the ice.

Hall picked up six points in his first three games of the season, but since then has been fairly quiet. He's hoping this break is what the team needs to turn things around.

"I thought my first six games were very good. I felt comfortable with how I was playing. The last four, not so great, but I still believe in myself and what I can do and how I can help the team," Hall said. "We're gonna get it together as a team. We're right in the middle of a playoff race that's there for the taking."

The Sabres will be back at practice Sunday afternoon. More players are eligible to come off the COVID protocol list as long as they pass all of the mandatory tests.

Sabres forward Taylor Hall returns to practice after taken off COVID-19 list

By Paul Ross

WKBW

February 13, 2021

BUFFALO, N.Y. (WKBW) — Buffalo Sabres forward Taylor Hall was back at practice on Saturday after being removed from the COVID-19 list.

More Sabres players could come off the list as early as Sunday.

The Sabres still have eight players on the list, and confirmed that head coach Ralph Krueger tested positive for COVID-19.

The last game the Sabres played was Sunday, January 31st against the New Jersey Devils.

The Sabres next game is scheduled for Monday, February 15th at home against the New York Islanders.

Ralph Krueger, Rasmus Dahlin return to Sabres

By Paul Stockman

WIVB

February 14, 2021

BUFALO, N.Y. (WIVB) – More names are coming off the COVID protocol list, including a very important one. Head coach Ralph Krueger returned to the team Sunday after his stint on the NHL's COVID protocol list. Last week the team confirmed he actually tested positive for the virus and was symptomatic.

He got on the ice for a few minutes, then left and assistant coach Steve Smith ran the practice from there. Krueger said he never ran a fever, but he did have moderate to severe symptoms. He had a lot of aches and sleeping and fatigue for more than a week.

"Definitely time to realize how lethal this Covid is," Krueger said. "Everybody knows I try to keep myself in shape and manage that part of my life, but just really pleased in the last few days to get back to feeling more normal. I'll take it a day at a time. Today was an excellent day to spend with the staff and with the players. I went soft on the ice, but otherwise really trying to go through a regular day."

Krueger said he'll see how he feels Monday to decide whether or not he'll coach on the bench. Said he's so far feeling well, but is scarred by the experience.

"Grateful to be one of the people coming out of it by the looks of it and also really pay my respects to the people working in medical care and then for the many families that didn't have success with dealing with it the way I have and our medical team's been amazing in the support and my wife didn't get it which is a bit of a miracle in itself," Krueger said. "She's been multiple tested, but she's fine and I'm very grateful for that too."

He had a lot of appreciation for the medical staff with the Sabres for helping him through the situation. He was happy to be back on the ice with the team, even though it was just for a short amount of time.

"Just this morning when the players arrived and we passed each other and getting on the ice for a few minutes just gives you so much energy back," Krueger said. "You know why you're here. You love the group you're working with and the potential of the group and the individuals and so my answer to you would be it was outstanding to be back on the ice, be around the players and the staff and knowing our fans are waiting at home for us to get back in action, I get a surge of energy right now just even talking about it."

Rasmus Dahlin the other guy that came off the list Sunday. Dahlin actually tested negative. He had to go on the COVID list because of contact tracing. He was able to workout during his quarantine since he tested negative, so that's a lot of what he did while he was away. He was happy to return and also glad to see his head coach back on the ice as well.

"Him being back is huge," Dahlin said. "He's doing well and it really got us going today and it's going to get it going tomorrow too so it's going to be a great day, I'm looking forward to tomorrow."

Krueger and Dahlin he second and third members of the team to get back after a stint on the league's COVID protocol list. That challenge is behind them, but a new one lies ahead. They've had to postpone six games these past two weeks, and starting Monday, if they avoid any more postponements, they'll play 46 games in a little more than 80 days. It's a stretch they know will be difficult, but also one they're ready to face.

"It's tough and the same for everyone so we've just got to go out there and compete first of all and then the other stuff will come and hopefully get a win and then end everything's going to go naturally I think," Dahlin said.

"I think it's important not to look at the standings right now, that we take the next block of 10 games and make sure that coming out of that we are in a good position and be patient with our reentry to be able to get our habits activated," Krueger said. "We're playing a team as dedicated to the way it plays in the Islanders as anybody in our division and they are definitely finding their a game at the moment so it'll be a big test right off the bat tomorrow."

Dahlin plans to play on Monday night against the New York Islanders as does Taylor Hall, who returned to the team Saturday morning. That game starts at 7 at the KeyBank Center.

Taylor Hall returns after stint on COVID protocol list

By Paul Stockman

WIVB

February 13, 2021

BUFFALO, N.Y. (WIVB) – Mark one name off the Sabers COVID protocol list. Taylor Hall returned to the ice for practice Saturday morning. He was one of the first names added to the list last week, and said he tested positive, but was asymptomatic.

He completed a rehab skate Friday which allowed him to return to the ice. Even though he tested positive, he wasn't afraid during his time in quarantine.

"I don't have people at-risk living with me," Hall said. "I wasn't around people that are at risk during the time that I was exposed so I wasn't too worried about it."

Hall was on the second line at his first practice, just getting back into the swing of things, but he expects to play against the New York Islanders on Monday.

"Your first game is always going to feel may be a little bit rusty after time off but there's no better way to get back into it then to throw yourself in and just play," Hall said. "I think with the doctors and the medical staff we still need to chat a little bit and review some things, but I plan on trying to play on Monday."

He also said the league doesn't let players workout at home while they're in quarantine for a positive test, but he's not worried about being out of shape for his first game back.

"I'm working back into it, but there's lots of times in the summer where I take seven, eight, nine, 10 days off at a time just to rest and I come back and skate and you don't always feel great the first day, but overall it eventually comes back pretty quick and I'm not worried about that," he said.

Hall is taking a similar response to the situation as the rest of the team. He said there were some frustrations, but they're trying to look forward.

"This is everyone's first time going through this," Hall said. "There's going to be mistakes that are not on purpose. We're all trying our best and I don't think anyone deserves anymore blame than anyone else."

Hall said during his time off he watched a lot of Netflix and played Xbox. He also reflected on his performance in the first 10 games of the year.

"Obviously it's been awhile since I've scored," he said. "I thought my first six games of the year were very good. I felt comfortable with how I was playing. The last four, not so great, but I still believe in myself and what I can do and how I can help the team and I think you see the weapons you can play with on this team and that's why I wanted to come play here."

When it comes to the future of this year's club, he thinks they've got a shot at the postseason.

"We're going to get it together as a team," Hall said. "We're still right in the middle of a playoff race that is there for the taking so I'm excited to be back and hopefully we can win some games here pretty quick."

He's of course happy to be back playing hockey again, but he really missed being with the guys during his time away.

"To be around the team, that's what being a hockey player is all about is yakking it up with the guys in the dressing room before the skate and being out there and laughing when someone messes up. It's fun to be back and have that camaraderie," Hall said.

Rasmus Dahlin, Dylan Cozens, Curtis Lazar, Casey Mittelstadt, Brandon Montour, Tobias Rieder, Rasmus Ristolainen and Jake McCabe are all still on the COVID protocol list along with coach Ralph Krueger.

Hamilton: How the Sabres can get back in East Division race after return from shutdown

By Paul Hamilton

WGRZ

February 14, 2021

BUFFALO, N.Y. — As the Sabres return to play Monday against the New York Islanders, I think they have to just ignore where the Isles are at in the standings.

New York has points in its last six games going 3-0-3 and is five points in front of Buffalo. The Sabres have played three fewer games and have a points percentage of .500. The Islanders are at .577.

Just one regulation win on Monday would put Buffalo ahead of the Islanders in points percentage, .545 to .536.

Ralph Krueger is out of NHL COVID-19 Protocol and was on the ice for a few minutes Sunday before watching the rest of practice from the stands. He said, "We need to scrap ourselves back into the race. I think it's important not to look at the standings right now, that we take the next block of 10 games and make sure coming out of that we're in a good position."

If the Sabres just look at the standings it's too overwhelming and I think it could hurt their game. The one thing I can tell you is if the Sabres want any chance of getting into the final East Division playoff spot, they must start getting goals from Jack Eichel, Jeff Skinner and Taylor Hall. They have three goals between them and that won't get it done.

Rasmus Dahlin came out of the Protocol as a person that had close contact with somebody that tested positive. He said on Sunday that he never tested positive and stopped living with Casey Mittelstadt on February 1, when this all started. Mittelstadt is still in the Protocol and we don't know if he tested positive.

I think what you saw on the ice Sunday is what we likely will see on Monday against the Islanders. You'd have Linus Ullmark and Carter Hutton in goal. The defense would be Dahlin, Colin Miller, Matt Irwin, Henri Jokiharju, Brandon Davidson and Will Borgen. The forwards are Jeff Skinner, Jack Eichel, Victor Olofsson, Taylor Hall, Eric Staal, Sam Reinhart, C.J. Smith, Cody Eakin, Kyle Okposo, Steven Fogarty, Riley Sheahan and Tage Thompson.

That would leave Jonas Johansson and Jacob Bryson for the taxi squad. Buffalo would have to add two more to that.

Sure, the Sabres could get more players off the COVID list on Monday. I always say you never know, but I think it would be difficult to put a player into a game the day he comes off the COVID-19 list.

Sabres head coach Ralph Krueger, defenseman Rasmus Dahlin back at practice

By Julianne Pelusi

WGRZ

February 14, 2021

BUFFALO, N.Y. — Sabres head coach Ralph Krueger and defenseman Rasmus Dahlin were back at practice on Sunday, both returning from the NHL's COVID-19 protocol.

Krueger was back on the ice briefly before watching the remainder of practice from the stands with assistant coach Don Granato, while assistant coach Steve Smith continued to run practice, as he has since the Sabres returned to KeyBank Center on Tuesday.

Krueger tested positive for the virus on Feb. 4, and said he experienced "moderately severe" symptoms from COVID-19, including fatigue and aches, for more than a week.

"Everybody knows I try to keep myself in good shape - manage that part of my life - but I had no chance. I'm just really pleased to get back to feeling more normal. I'll take it a day at a time," Krueger said after practice.

Dahlin was a full participant on Sunday and said he tested negative for COVID-19 the entire time he was in the league's protocol, but was added to the protocol list because of close contact.

Dahlin is the second Sabres player to return to practice from the league's protocol list, after forward Taylor Hall returned to the ice on Saturday. Hall confirmed he did test positive for the virus but was asymptomatic.

Both Hall and Dahlin expect to play Monday night against the New York Islanders. Unlike Hall, Dahlin was able to workout and stay in shape throughout his quarantine because of his negative tests.

The Sabres have not played since Jan. 31 against the New Jersey Devils.

Sabres' Taylor Hall confirms positive COVID-19 test; first Sabres player to return from NHL protocol list

By Julianne Pelusi

WGRZ

February 13, 2021

BUFFALO, N.Y. — Buffalo Sabres forward Taylor Hall was back on the ice Saturday for practice, as the first of nine players on the team to return from the NHL's COVID-19 protocol list, and said he did test positive for the coronavirus when he was put on the list on Feb. 2.

"I had tested positive, and I was asymptomatic, so I just had to quarantine for 10 days," Hall said after practice.

The 29-year old forward said he was feeling healthy and was able to complete a rehab skate on Friday, ahead of his return to the ice with the team. Hall anticipates he will be able to play on Monday against the New York Islanders, in the Sabres next scheduled game, despite the time away from the rink.

"Unfortunately, with the league's protocol, we're not allowed to work out at home when you test positive for COVID," Hall said about being ready and in 'game-shape' on Monday.

"I'm working back into it, but there's lots of times in the summer where I take seven to eight, nine, ten days off at a time to rest and come back and skate, and you don't always feel great... It eventually comes back pretty quick, and I'm not worried about that."

Hall was the only Sabres player taken off the NHL's official protocol list on Saturday.

Dylan Cozens, Rasmus Dahlin, Curtis Lazar, Jake McCabe, Casey Mittelstadt, Brandon Montour, Tobias Rieder and Rasmus Ristolainen are still listed in the league's protocol.

The Sabres haven't played a game since Jan. 31 against the New Jersey Devils, before nine players were added to the NHL's COVID-19 protocol list over the span of seven days. The league postponed six straight Sabres game against the Islanders, Boston Bruins and Washington Capitals.

Hall back on ice, first Sabres player off NHL's COVID-19 protocol list

By Julianne Pelusi

WGRZ

February 13, 2021

BUFFALO, N.Y. — Buffalo Sabres forward Taylor Hall returned to practice with the team on Saturday, after being placed on the NHL's COVID-19 protocol list.

Hall and defenseman Rasmus Ristolainen were the first Sabres added to the league's list, two days after the team played two games against the New Jersey Devils, who had players in protocol at the time, in back to back days.

The 29-year-old forward started practice on a line with Eric Staal and Sam Reinhart, according to 2 On Your Side's Sabres commentator Paul Hamilton.

Hall's name was still included in the NHL's protocol list as of Friday evening, along with eight other Sabres players and Head Coach Ralph Krueger, who tested positive for COVID-19.

The team signed Hall to a one-year, \$8 million contract in the most recent offseason.

Sabres go 4 straight days without player added to NHL's COVID-19 Protocol

By Julianne Pelusi

WGRZ

February 12, 2021

BUFFALO, N.Y. — It has been 10 days since Sabres forward Taylor Hall and defenseman Rasmus Ristolainen were added to the NHL's COVID-19 Protocol list, but the nine players on the team's list remained the same on Friday evening.

According to the league, if a player tested positive, but didn't have any symptoms, they're going to be in protocol for 10 days. The player must be symptom free the whole time they're in quarantine to be able to exit the protocol.

"If at least 10 days have passed since symptoms first appeared, and at least 24 hours have passed since last fever without the use of fever-reducing medications, and symptoms (e.g., cough, shortness of breath, etc.) have improved," the league said.

The good news for the Sabres: the team has now gone four straight days without a player added to the league's protocol, after putting at least one player on the list in six of seven days, between February 2 and February 8.

The Sabres resumed practice on Tuesday after six games were postponed because of their COVID-19 issue. The team was off on Friday and will get back to practice Saturday morning, ahead of their scheduled restart to the season, Monday night, hosting the New York Islanders.

The NHL announced on Thursday it will begin rapid testing on game days, among other new regulations, to help prevent the spread of COVID-19 throughout the league.

Sabres' Taylor Hall Returns After Completing COVID-19 Protocol

Spectrum News

February 13, 2021

BUFFALO, N.Y. — A member of the Sabres sidelined by COVID-19 is back and preparing to play against the New York Islanders Monday.

Forward Taylor Hall practiced with the team at KeyBank Center Saturday after completing the NHL's COVID-19 protocol.

Hall says he was asymptomatic but tested positive for coronavirus last week. He completed a 10-day quarantine and a solo skate before rejoining the team.

Hall and Rasmus Ristolainen were the first Sabres to be taken off the ice due to the virus on February 2.

In total, nine members of the team plus head coach Ralph Krueger entered the league's COVID-19 protocol after hosting the New Jersey Devils.

Several players from the Devils' roster were confirmed positive for the virus after their game on January 31.

The puck drops against the Islanders at 7 p.m. Monday at home in Buffalo.

Krueger rejoins Sabres after having COVID-19, 'scarred by the experience'

By Heather Engel

NHL.com

February 15, 2021

BUFFALO -- Ralph Krueger was back at practice Sunday after testing positive for COVID-19, but it's unknown if the 61-year-old will coach the Buffalo Sabres at home against the New York Islanders on Monday (7 p.m. ET; NBCSN, MSG-B, NHL.TV).

"Today was an excellent day to spend with the staff and with the players," Krueger said. "I went soft on the ice, but otherwise, really trying to go through a regular day. And then we'll see how I feel tomorrow morning."

Krueger greeted trainers and staff and chatted with several players on the ice before going off to the corners to watch assistant Steve Smith run practice. He stayed on the ice for about 15 minutes before speaking with Smith and then retreating to the stands to watch the rest of the session.

He entered NHL COVID-19 protocol Feb. 4.

"I had moderately severe symptoms," Krueger said. "I never did end up having a fever, but I did end up with a lot of aches and sleeping and fatigue for more than a week. Definitely time to realize how lethal this COVID is."

It was the first time Krueger was on the ice since Feb. 1, Buffalo's last practice before its season was paused. The Sabres (4-4-2) haven't played since a 5-3 loss to the New Jersey Devils on Jan. 31.

"So far, I'm feeling quite well, but of course scarred by the experience," he said. "Grateful to be one of the people coming out of it by the looks of it. And really pay my respects to the people working in the medical care, and then for the many families who didn't have success in dealing with it the way I have. Our medical team has been amazing in the support."

"My wife didn't get it, which is a bit of a miracle in itself. She's been multiple tested but she's fine. And I'm very grateful for that, too."

Though Krueger's time on the ice was brief, returning provided him with a welcome jolt.

"First of all, I didn't want to fall down after two weeks off, so I checked that box," Krueger said. "Just this morning, when the players arrived and we passed each other, and getting out on the ice for a few minutes gives you so much energy back. You know why you're here. You love the group you're working with and the potential of the group and the individuals. ... I get a surge of energy right now just even talking about it."

Rasmus Dahlin also returned after being in protocol as a close contact. The defenseman skated with Colin Miller at practice and is expected to be in the lineup against the Islanders.

"I was negative from the beginning," Dahlin said, "just trying to stay away and keep the things I have to do and get ready for the game tomorrow. That's all I can do."

Dahlin was the second player to exit protocol after forward Taylor Hall practiced Saturday. He said also having Krueger back gave the Sabres an extra boost.

"It's huge," Dahlin said. "He's doing well, and it got us going today and he's going to get us going tomorrow, too, so it's going to be a great day. I'm looking forward to tomorrow."

Local artist Edjres Wajed designs Sabres logo with Black history message

By Cristina Ledra

NHL.com

February 12, 2021

Local artist Edreys Wajed is recognizing the Buffalo Sabres' place in Black history with a new design for a great cause.

Wajed, a Buffalo native, was inspired by Val James, the NHL's first Black American player and created a new logo for a shirt that is being sold to benefit Breaking Barriers, an initiative that "is aimed at accelerating positive outcomes for boys and young men of color across the cradle-to-career continuum."

"You can't aspire to something if you haven't seen it," Wajed told the Sabres website. "That's what breaking barriers is. Are they exposed to opportunities, are they exposed to alternate paths? And that's important for a child to be exposed to certain things and to be able to make a decision.

"The courage it took for the first African-American hockey player to play in a predominantly white league and then also the courage of the Sabres to take that step as well, I think that's rich."

Wajed reimagined Buffalo's logo to incorporate the colors of the Buffalo Braves, a former NBA team that shared Buffalo Memorial Auditorium with the Sabres in the 1970s.

He replaced the Sabres' crossed swords with swords of war, or Akofena, which is a symbol of courage, valor and heroism, and is West African in origin.

The "1981" inside the logo represents the year the Sabres signed James. He was drafted by the Detroit Red Wings in 1977 but never played in any regulation games. He played seven games for the Sabres during the 1981-82 season, and his debut marked the first time a Black American played in the NHL. James' No. 26 is also featured in the logo.

Underneath the logo, it reads, "the first african american to play in the NHL was a Buffalo Sabre."

"Going from 2021 and throwing the thread all the way back joining these pieces together so that people understand it was and is a part of the Sabres that you cheer on today" Wajed said. "So when you rock the blue and the gold, that's part of it."

The t-shirt can be purchased at ShopOneBuffalo or as part of a Sabres Game Night To Go pack.

Krueger rejoins Sabres, details experience with COVID-19

By Jourdon LaBarber

Sabres.com

February 14, 2021

Ralph Krueger detailed his experience with COVID-19 upon rejoining the Sabres for practice on Sunday, 11 days after announcing he had tested positive for the virus.

Krueger, 61, said he experienced "moderately severe" symptoms, including aches and fatigue. He briefly joined the team on the ice for the beginning of practice before watching the rest of the session from the stands along with assistant coach Don Granato.

Krueger has not made a decision as to whether he will be behind the bench for Buffalo's game against the New York Islanders on Monday. Assistant coach Steve Smith has been running practice in his absence.

"Definitely a time to realize how lethal this COVID is," Krueger said. "Everyone knows I try to keep myself in good shape and manage that part of my life. Just really pleased in the last few days to get back to feeling more normal. I'll take it a day at a time."

Krueger was one of two returnees Sunday along with defenseman Rasmus Dahlin, who revealed that he never tested positive for the virus. Dahlin was included on the COVID-related absence list since Feb. 8 after being identified as a potential close contact.

The Sabres have seven remaining COVID-related absences: forwards Dylan Cozens, Curtis Lazar, Casey Mittelstadt, and Tobias Rieder and defensemen Jake McCabe, Brandon Montour, and Rasmus Ristolainen.

Krueger kept his sights forward when addressing the events that led to Buffalo's outbreak. The Sabres had not had a COVID case prior to their game against the New Jersey Devils on Jan. 31, at which time New Jersey had six COVID-related absences.

The Devils added more players into COVID protocol the following day and have not played since. The Sabres' first two additions to the COVID-related absence list came the day after that.

The NHL and NHLPA have since announced enhanced safety measures to reduce the incidence of the virus around the league.

"When you see how many players on both teams were symptomatic, and staff members, too, we clearly had a rough weekend there," Krueger said. "But for me, I like to be constructive and I'm happy the NHL has been as constructive as possible in learning from the experience that we had. So, it seems to make it worthwhile."

"We are, number one, in this game for the game of hockey for the sport, for the league and its success. And that's something that we feel the new protocols are doing is they are protecting the athletes and the staff members. They are protecting the game that we could carry it out through the rest of the season."

Krueger and the Sabres will now be tasked with navigating a significantly condensed schedule of 46 games in less than three months while carefully reincorporating players as they become available from the COVID-related absence list.

All of this comes as the Sabres seek to ascend within a competitive East Division. They entered Sunday just five points out of the fourth and final playoff spot with three games in hand on the team occupying it - which happens to be their next opponent, the Islanders.

Krueger said he will try to direct the team's focus away from the standings and more on its habits as it re-enters from the two-week layoff. Managing ice times and increasing the frequency of days off between games will all be on the table moving forward.

"We need to do only one thing, and that's what's best for the team the team to win hockey games," he said. "If it means staying off the ice between games days, if it means almost avoiding ice completely other than games for certain stretches, that could happen."

"Sports science has never quite as an important role as right now as we can monitor any piece of information we can get on the guys and then work with them accordingly between the game."

Sunday's practice

Dahlin said he planned to play against the Islanders Monday, meaning the lineup we saw at practice could offer a preview of what to expect come game time:

53 Jeff Skinner - 9 Jack Eichel - 68 Victor Olofsson
4 Taylor Hall - 12 Eric Staal - 23 Sam Reinhart
49 C.J. Smith - 20 Cody Eakin - 21 Kyle Okposo
72 Tage Thompson - 15 Riley Sheahan - 17 Steven Fogarty

26 Rasmus Dahlin - 33 Colin Miller
44 Matt Irwin - 10 Henri Jokiharju
88 Brandon Davidson - 3 William Borgen

Jacob Bryson, who was reassigned from Rochester to the taxi squad on Saturday, rotated in as the seventh defenseman. Krueger said he planned to talk with general manager Kevyn Adams after his session with the media and added there could be tweaks to the lineup for Monday.

"We need to make sure we're well-covered on our specialty teams," Krueger said. "The penalty killing role that Tobias Rieder and Curtis Lazar leave open is something we need to fill. So, there's a few factors here. This lineup will be definitely close to what you're going to see tomorrow but I would still expect some potential one or two changes in that."

Hall returns to practice, aims to play Monday

By Jourdon LaBarber

Sabres.com

February 13, 2021

Buffalo Sabres forward Taylor Hall confirmed he tested positive for COVID-19 and was asymptomatic throughout his time on the NHL's COVID-related absence list.

Hall was back on the ice with the Sabres for their practice at KeyBank Center on Saturday, making him the first to return among Buffalo's nine COVID-related absences. He was among the first Sabres to enter protocol, along with defenseman Rasmus Ristolainen, on Feb. 2.

Hall completed 10 days of quarantine and a solo rehab skate Friday before rejoining the team. He is aiming to play against the New York Islanders on Monday.

"I think at this point, whether you play a game or not, your first game back is always going to feel maybe a little bit rusty after time off," Hall said. "But there's no better way to get back into it than to throw yourself in and just play. I think with doctors and the medical staff we still need to chat a little bit and review some things and all that. But I plan on trying to play on Monday."

The Sabres players who did not enter COVID protocol have been practicing as a team since Tuesday following a week-long shutdown of team facilities. They were delivered synthetic ice and stationary bikes to stay active during the time away from the rink.

Hall had no such luxuries. Though asymptomatic, NHL regulations precluded Hall from working out even at home after testing positive for the virus. Days blended together as he simply passed the time, awaiting the opportunity to rejoin his teammates. He and other players within COVID protocol formed a group chat to check in on one another along the way.

"I'm working back into it," Hall said. "There's lots of times in the summer where I take seven to eight, nine days off at a time to rest and I come back and skate. You don't always feel great the first day but overall, it eventually comes back pretty quick and I'm not worried about that. Fitness is always a touchy kind of subject and I think some guys can overthink it a bit. Just kind of go out and play and see what happens."

Hall has nine points (1+8) through his first 10 games with the Sabres after signing a one-year deal during the offseason. The Sabres have played to a .500 points percentage and sit just three points out of a playoff spot despite having not played a game in nearly two weeks.

"I still believe in myself and what I can do and how I can help the team and the weapons that you can play with on this team, and that's why I wanted to come play here," he said.

"We're going to get it together as a team. We're still right in the middle of a playoff race that is there for the taking so I'm excited to be back and hopefully we can win some games here pretty quick."

Saturday's practice

After practicing shorthanded in their last three sessions, the Sabres reassigned forwards C.J. Smith and Steven Fogarty and defenseman Jacob Bryson from Rochester to the taxi squad on Saturday.

The additions - along with the return of Hall - gave the Sabres a full four forward lines and three defense pairs in preparation for their game on Monday. This is how they lined up:

53 Jeff Skinner - 9 Jack Eichel - 68 Victor Olofsson
4 Taylor Hall - 12 Eric Staal - 23 Sam Reinhart
49 C.J. Smith - 20 Cody Eakin - 21 Kyle Okposo
72 Tage Thompson - 15 Riley Sheahan - 17 Steven Fogarty

88 Brandon Davidson - 33 Colin Miller
44 Matt Irwin - 10 Henri Jokiharju
78 Jacob Bryson - 3 William Borgen

35 Linus Ullmark
40 Carter Hutton
34 Jonas Johansson

The following players remain on the COVID-related absence list: forwards Dylan Cozens, Curtis Lazar, Casey Mittelstadt, and Tobias Rieder and defensemen Rasmus Dahlin, Jake McCabe, Brandon Montour, and Rasmus Ristolainen.

Bryson, Fogarty, Smith reassigned to Sabres taxi squad

By Chris Ryndak

Sabres.com

February 13, 2021

The Buffalo Sabres have reassigned forwards Steven Fogarty and C.J. Smith and defenseman Jacob Bryson from the Rochester Americans (AHL) to the team's taxi squad. Goaltender Dustin Tokarski has been reassigned to Rochester.

Rochester overcame an early 2-0 deficit last night to defeat the Cleveland Monsters 7-3 on the road. Smith recorded two goals and an assist while goaltender Ukko-Pekka Luukkonen made 43 saves.

Smith is tied with Jean-Sebastien Dea for the scoring lead in Rochester with four points (2+2).

Fogarty, the Amerks captain, signed a one-year deal with Buffalo this past offseason after spending parts of five seasons with the New York Rangers organization, for which he captained the AHL affiliate in Hartford in 2019-20. He scored the overtime winner for Rochester on Wednesday.

Bryson, a fourth-round pick from 2017, tallied 27 points (4+23) in 61 games last season as a rookie in Rochester. He has one assist through three games this year with the Amerks.

Buffalo is set to practice this morning at KeyBank Center.

Nine Sabres players - forwards Dylan Cozens, Taylor Hall, Curtis Lazar, Casey Mittelstadt and Tobias Rieder, and defensemen Rasmus Dahlin, Jake McCabe, Brandon Montour and Rasmus Ristolainen - plus head coach Ralph Krueger are currently in the NHL's COVID protocols and are unavailable for practice, travel or games until they are removed from protocol.

The NHL is sharing the names of players who are "unavailable" to teams due to COVID protocols this season and updates this list daily.

These "COVID Protocol Related Absences" can be the result of a number of factors including, among others:

- (1) an initial positive test which remains unconfirmed until confirmatory testing is completed pursuant to the Positive Test Protocol;
- (2) mandated isolation for symptomatic individuals pursuant to the Positive Test Protocol;
- (3) required quarantine as a high-risk close contact in accordance with the Positive Test Protocol;
- (4) isolation based on a confirmed positive test result and/or;
- (5) quarantine for travel or other reasons as outlined in the COVID-19 Protocol.

No additional detail will be provided either by the League or the team, including the precise reason a player is unavailable or how long he might be out.

Buffalo is next scheduled to play Monday night against the New York Islanders at KeyBank Center. Pregame coverage on MSG will begin at 6:30 p.m. The game can be seen both on MSG and NBCSN at 7 p.m. and heard on WGR 550.

Adams to serve on Team USA advisory board for World Championship

By Jourdon LaBarber

Sabres.com

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Kevyn Adams will forever remember receiving the call from USA Hockey informing him he had made the team for the World Junior Championship in 1994. Adams had been cut by the national team time and time again to that point, making the honor of representing his country that much more special.

The Buffalo Sabres general manager received a similar phone call recently from John Vanbiesbrouck, assistant executive director of hockey operations for USA Hockey. Vanbiesbrouck invited Adams to serve on the United States Men's National Team Advisory Group for the 2021 IIHF World Championship.

Adams will serve in the group alongside Stan Bowman (Chicago), Tom Fitzgerald (New Jersey), Jeff Gorton (New York Rangers), Bill Guerin (Minnesota), Lou Lamoriello (New York Islanders), David Poile (Nashville), Don Waddell (Carolina), and Bill Zito (Florida).

"In some ways it was even more special, to be honest with you," Adams said, referring to the call from Vanbiesbrouck. "... To grow up American and now be in this position and to be able to give back and be part of something, it is."

Adams and his fellow advisors will assist former Sabres forward Chris Drury, who will serve as the team's general manager. The group will lend support based on their own evaluations and philosophies as they pertain to the style of team Drury aims to build for the tournament.

The experience should also benefit Adams - described by colleagues as an avid learner - in his role as Sabres general manager. He will collaborate alongside an accomplished group of fellow NHL executives, opening the door to learn from their philosophies and experiences along the way.

"I think no matter who you're talking to and what type of conversation you're having, it's an opportunity to learn," Adams said. "So, when you look at that group of people and what they've accomplished in the game, I think it's just asking questions. What do they see? How do they value certain things? What do they put more importance on in some ways and other ways?"

"I think that will help me. And then also just learning different styles. I like to ask questions and I like to listen and I'm going to be asking a lot of questions with that group and then wherever I can help, I will."

The tournament is scheduled to run from May 21 to June 6 in Riga, Latvia. For Adams, the best part may come sooner.

"One of the things that will be exciting will be to make those calls as you get closer to the World Championships," he said. "Those are great phone calls to make because it's a great honor to play for your country and something that anyone who grows up playing hockey dreams about."

SPCA donations in memory of Linus Ullmark's father surpass \$7,000

By Jourdon LaBarber

Sabres.com

February 12, 2021

Buffalo Sabres fans have donated upwards of \$7,000 to the SPCA Serving Erie County in memory of goaltender Linus Ullmark's late father, Jan-Olof Ullmark, who passed away on Jan. 18.

Ullmark thanked fans in an Instagram post earlier this week.

"Thank you to the Sabres fans and members of the Buffalo community who donated to the SPCA in honor of my father," he wrote. "He would be proud of the way you've chosen to honor him, and I am too. I find strength in knowing the support I have behind me in this community, and I am thankful for it."

Ullmark has supported the SPCA through his "Ullmark's Barks" program, in which he teamed up with the organization to sponsor dog adoptions. Several donations have come in increments of \$35 as a nod to the goaltender's jersey number.

The page to donate in memory of Ullmark's father can be found [here](#).

"This effort reflects what Buffalo truly is," said Gina Lattuca, chief communications officer for the SPCA Serving Erie County. "A beloved, Buffalo athlete chooses to do what he can to make the lives of our community's animals richer. Then when he loses his father, Buffalo fans, on their own, understanding that pain, take the initiative to begin donating to honor this wonderful man and memorialize another."

"It's compassion, personified over and over. The level of genuine kindness we noted in Linus is an indication of the exceptional man his father must have been. We are profoundly grateful to the fans who chose to express their sympathy through their gifts, and to Linus, for continuing a legacy of love."

Tokarski joins Sabres taxi squad

By Chris Ryndak

Sabres.com

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The Buffalo Sabres have reassigned goaltender Dustin Tokarski from the Rochester Americans (AHL) to the team's taxi squad. Forward C.J. Smith has been reassigned to Rochester.

The Amerks play in Cleveland tonight. Faceoff is scheduled for 7 p.m. on The Sports Leader 95.7 FM/950 AM ESPN Rochester and AHLTV. The game will also be the AHL's featured matchup of the week on Facebook Watch.

Captain Steven Fogarty scored the game-winner in Rochester's 4-3 overtime victory over Syracuse on Wednesday. Remi Elie scored twice, Brett Murray added another, Oskari Laaksonen recorded three assists and Ukko-Pekka Luukkonen made 20 saves to pick up his first win of the season. Smith assisted on the first goal of the game.

Buffalo is next scheduled to play Monday night against the New York Islanders at 7 p.m. Pregame coverage begins at 6:30 p.m. on MSG. The game can be seen on both MSG and NBCSN, and heard live on WGR 550.