



# **Buffalo Sabres**

## **Daily Press Clips**

*March 22, 2021*

## **Buffalo faces New York on 6-game road skid**

Associated Press

March 21, 2021

Buffalo Sabres (6-19-4, eighth in the East Division) vs. New York Rangers (13-13-4, sixth in the East Division)

New York; Monday, 7 p.m. EDT

**BOTTOM LINE:** Buffalo travels to New York looking to end its six-game road skid.

The Rangers are 13-13-4 against the rest of their division. New York averages 9.4 penalty minutes per game, the sixth-most in the NHL. Brendan Lemieux leads the team serving 50 total minutes.

The Sabres are 6-19-4 against opponents in the East Division. Buffalo serves 5.9 penalty minutes per game, the fewest in the NHL. Taylor Hall leads the team averaging 0.8.

In their last meeting on March 2, New York won 3-2.

**TOP PERFORMERS:** Chris Kreider leads the Rangers with 14 goals, adding six assists and totaling 20 points. Pavel Buchnevich has 13 points over the last 10 games for New York.

Jack Eichel leads the Sabres with 16 total assists and has 18 points. Sam Reinhart has four goals and one assist over the last 10 games for Buffalo.

**LAST 10 GAMES:** Rangers: 5-4-1, averaging 3.6 goals, 5.9 assists, 3.1 penalties and 7.5 penalty minutes while giving up 2.4 goals per game with a .908 save percentage.

Sabres: 0-9-1, averaging 1.7 goals, 3.2 assists, three penalties and 7.4 penalty minutes while allowing 3.9 goals per game with an .873 save percentage.

**INJURIES:** Rangers: Justin Richards: out (health protocols), Jack Johnson: out (sports hernia), Phillip Di Giuseppe: day to day (health and safety protocols), Igor Shesterkin: day to day (lower body).

Sabres: Dylan Cozens: day to day (head), Jake McCabe: out (knee), Will Borgen: out (forearm), Jack Eichel: out (upper body), Linus Ullmark: out (lower body).

## **Avalanche land goalie Jonas Johansson in trade with Sabres**

By Pat Graham

Associated Press

March 20, 2021

DENVER (AP) — The Colorado Avalanche acquired Jonas Johansson from the Buffalo Sabres on Saturday in a bid to shore up their shaky backup goaltending.

The Sabres received Colorado's sixth-round draft pick in a trade agreed to a day earlier. The Sabres had to wait for COVID-19 testing results after the Boston Bruins, their most recent opponent, had four players enter the NHL protocol Friday.

Buffalo also had to wait for goaltender Michael Houser, who was signed Friday, to clear waivers to avoid having to call up a goalie from the minors.

The Avalanche have relied heavily on starter Philipp Grubauer this season, with backup Pavel Francouz sidelined by a lower-body injury. Hunter Miska has filled in for Grubauer at times, but he's struggled and has a 4.16 goals-against average.

Miska was recently sent down to the Colorado Eagles of the American Hockey League, with Adam Werner recalled from the Eagles.

Johansson was 0-5-1 in seven games for the Sabres this season, with a 3.79 goals-against average and an .884 save percentage and has an overall record of 1-8-2. The 25-year-old was a third-round pick by Buffalo in 2014.

"We'll look at him here first and make a decision on what our plan is for him," coach Jared Bednar said after the Avalanche beat Minnesota 6-0 on Saturday behind a 31-save performance from Grubauer. "He's been on a steady progression getting better and on a good development path."

Johansson received increased playing time with the Sabres after starter Linus Ullmark sustained a lower-body injury last month. Ullmark is expected to miss another few weeks.

Grubauer has been spectacular despite the heavy workload. He's the first Colorado goaltender to start at least 20 of the team's first 25 games since Semyon Varlamov in 2012-13.

The 29-year-old Grubauer has 18 wins this season, which ties a career high. Saturday marked his fifth shutout this season — the most by an Avalanche goaltender since Varlamov had five in '14-15.

"It's awesome to have that reliable goaltender in the back end there," forward Tyson Jost said. "He's been great all year. We need that from him to continue throughout the year."

Colorado's defense has been a big help, too. The team had held opponents to under 30 shots in a franchise-record 18 straight games before it was snapped by the Wild on Saturday.

The Avalanche boasted an 18-8-2 halfway through the season. Their .679 percentage was the third-best mark at the midway point since the team moved to Denver.

The Sabres are in sell-off mode while in an 0-11-2 skid and in jeopardy of extending their playoff drought to an NHL-record matching 10th season.

This is expected to be the first of many trades for Buffalo. It comes three days since first-year general manager Kevyn Adams hinted a roster shakeup was coming after firing coach Ralph Krueger.

—

AP Hockey Writer John Wawrow contributed to this report.

## **Dan Girardi's coaching a 'fresh perspective' for Sabres' struggling defensemen**

By Lance Lysowski

The Buffalo News

March 22, 2021

The capacity crowd inside Madison Square Garden roared as Dan Girardi was introduced prior to the ceremonial puck drop Oct. 29, 2019.

Girardi, then recently retired following 13 seasons as a shutdown defenseman, is revered by New York Rangers fans for the fearlessness and tenacity he brought to the ice across 11 years in red, white and blue. The Welland, Ont., native finished his career as the NHL's all-time leader in blocked shots and averaged 25:59 of ice time in 20 games during the franchise's run to the Stanley Cup Final in 2015.

Girardi wasn't sure where his post-playing career would take him following that celebration in Manhattan. A job offer from longtime friend, Matt Ellis, and the firing of former Buffalo Sabres coach Ralph Krueger last week, has set the stage for an unlikely return to Madison Square Garden.

Girardi, who was elevated to interim assistant coach upon Krueger's firing, will make his NHL coaching debut behind the visitors' bench when the Rangers host the Sabres on Monday night.

"Going back to MSG, never would have guessed in a million years that the first time I go back there is coaching another team and the first game I'm coaching as well," said Girardi, 36. "It's definitely something I didn't see coming and didn't really realize it until the game (against Boston) got canceled the other day. It's definitely going to be a pretty surreal atmosphere and going into that rink anyways for the boys is always fun to play in."

The temporary assignment presents a significant challenge for Girardi. The Sabres' defensemen, particularly former first overall draft pick Rasmus Dahlin, have performed poorly since the two-week Covid-19 pause last month. During a 13-game winless streak, Buffalo ranks last in the NHL in suppressing shot quality at 5-on-5, according to NaturalStatTrick.com.

Defensemen haven't been strong enough on the forecheck or in front of their own net. Breakout passes have become an issue and a lack of confidence has led to failures in the offensive zone. Girardi, beloved by former teammates for his selflessness and unwavering work ethic, will provide a calming voice and different perspective to a group that is lacking confidence.

"I think it's a good opportunity for me to come in, you know, a guy that's been out of the game only a year and a half and has followed it really closely," said Girardi, who retired in September 2019. "So, a fresh perspective from the outside and someone the guys can probably relate to. A lot of the guys obviously know me from playing against me and kind of know what type of attitude and how I played."

"I do like to keep it light a little bit. Obviously, the situation we come into here is a little tough, but you can't worry about all that, what happened. We're very excited about the opportunity that's coming Monday at MSG, kind of a fresh little start here."

Former assistant coach Steve Smith, who was fired along with Krueger, was respected by the Sabres' defensemen. He won three Stanley Cups with the Edmonton Oilers and commanded position meetings with his honest approach.

Yet, most Sabres defensemen experienced a steep regression in Year 2 under Krueger.

Dahlin, still only 20 years old, has a league-worst minus-28 rating in 29 games and is failing to use his improved strength to prevent forwards from reaching the scoring areas around Buffalo's net. Henri Jokiharju, a 21-year-old former first-round draft pick, has been a healthy scratch in six of the past eight games after appearing in all 69 games last season. According to Evolving-Hockey.com, Jokiharju ranked third among qualifying Buffalo defensemen in on-ice 5-on-5 shot quality suppression in 2019-20. Rasmus Ristolainen has a minus-15 goal differential at 5-on-5 when not on the ice with Jake McCabe.

The group was hit hard by injuries to McCabe and Will Borgen, a 24-year-old who has missed the past 15 games with a fractured forearm. But General Manager Kevyn Adams' evaluation led him to bring in a different voice after

Smith had worked with the Sabres' defensemen since the start of the 2018-19 season under former coach Phil Housley.

Girardi, who joined the Sabres as a development coach in November, was the choice to join interim coach Don Granato's staff for the rest of the season.

"It's going to help him for sure and bode well that he did just play in the league," said Sabres winger Kyle Okposo, who played against Girardi. "He was partners with Ryan McDonagh for a lot of his career in New York and I know firsthand those guys were not fun to play against. He knows what it takes to play in the game and he knows the intricacies of the game, so I have no doubt that he is going to be a great teacher for our young defensemen. We've got a few back there who have a ton of room to grow, and I think Dan's going to help a lot in that regard."

Girardi blocked 1,913 shots and accumulated 264 points while averaging 21:33 of ice time across 927-regular season games. His 143 playoff games – 30th all-time among defensemen when he retired – included three conference finals and one Stanley Cup Final appearance. Girardi, an all-star in 2012, was paired with McDonagh during the Rangers' Presidents' Trophy season in 2014-15.

Girardi was not behind the bench for Granato's first game because he had to serve a mandatory quarantine. Finally, after clearing protocols, Girardi was on the ice for practice Friday. There were no stern talks with defensemen about individual performance. His focus is on working with Granato and Ellis to fix all that's gone wrong with the Sabres' game, particularly at 5-on-5.

However, Girardi's work with the young defensemen, particularly Dahlin, will be under the microscope in the final 27 games.

"He's willing, first day we had him, he like, 'Hey, anything you got for me, let me know,'" Girardi said of Dahlin. "He's willing to listen, willing to learn and wants to be taught, which is a great trait to have as a young guy in the league. Obviously, it hadn't been the greatest year for him; it's no secret. But he's willing to try anything he can, learn different things. ... It's all about building the confidence in these guys."

## **Goalie Linus Ullmark to join Sabres on three-city, four-game road trip**

By Lance Lysowski

The Buffalo News

March 21, 2021

Linus Ullmark, the Buffalo Sabres' top goaltender, will join the team on the three-city, four-game road trip that begins Monday night in Madison Square Garden against the New York Rangers.

Ullmark, who has been out of the lineup with a lower-body injury since Feb. 25, will need to practice with the Sabres before he is available to play in a game, but traveling with the team is a sign that his return is near.

"At this point, we're planning on him joining us on the road trip, which is great news," said interim coach Don Granato. "We need to integrate him into practice at some point. That's the next step here. At that point, we can evaluate a potential return, so that's all good news with Linus."

With Jonas Johansson traded to Colorado, the Sabres' two healthy goalies on the active roster are Carter Hutton and Dustin Tokarski. Michael Houser, a 28-year-old whose pro experience is only at the minor-league level, was added to the taxi squad Sunday after receiving an NHL contract Friday.

Hutton, a 35-year-old pending unrestricted free agent, will likely be in goal Monday night. He has a 1-10-1 record and .885 save percentage across 12 games this season.

The Sabres' next scheduled practice is Tuesday in Pittsburgh ahead of back-to-back games against the Penguins. The timeline may allow Hutton to start Wednesday, followed by Ullmark on Thursday. If not, the net could be Tokarski's.

Tokarski has not appeared in an NHL game since 2016-17. The 31-year-old is a two-time Calder Cup champion in the American Hockey League and joined the Sabres on a two-year contract in October. He has played only two games with the Rochester Americans this season.

Tokarski has appeared in 34 NHL games with Tampa Bay Lightning, Montreal Canadiens and Anaheim Ducks, compiling a 10-12-5 record and .904 save percentage. Upon Ullmark's return, Tokarski can go back to the taxi squad and Houser can be assigned to Rochester.

Prior to suffering the injury, Ullmark was again establishing himself as a reliable goaltender for the Sabres. He has a .919 save percentage and 2.44 goals-against average while posting a 5-4-2 record in 12 games.

In 12 games without Ullmark, the Sabres' two goalies – Hutton and Johansson – combined for the league's second-worst 5-on-5 save percentage (.881) during that span. Johansson, 25, was traded to the Avalanche on Saturday in exchange for a 2021 sixth-round draft pick.

Rookie forward Dylan Cozens, who has missed the past four games with an upper-body injury stemming from a hit by Pittsburgh Penguins winger Zach Aston-Reese, is expected to return to the Sabres' lineup Monday in New York.

Cozens has centered the Sabres' top line over the past two practices, skating alongside Taylor Hall and Sam Reinhart. Cozens, 20, had not skated with the team since he was driven into the boards by Aston-Reese on what teammate Victor Olofsson called a "dangerous" hit on March 11. Sabres defenseman Colin Miller came to Cozens' defense, fighting Aston-Reese in the 5-2 loss.

Cozens told the media Friday he's back to "100%" and was not a fan of the Aston-Reese hit.

"Back to the hit, I don't think it was too bad," said Cozens. "I think that falls under the definition of boarding, though. I just wasn't really expecting it. I think he was expecting me to lean into it a little bit. As you can see, he puts all his weight in it and falls over top of me. But I don't think it was too bad. I do think it was boarding. I mean, the way I went into the board from that distance, it's a dangerous hit. I mean, it's unnecessary and it's dangerous, but at the same time, he's just finishing his check. I mean, it is what it is."

Roster moves

In addition to adding Houser, the Sabres assigned forward Steven Fogarty to the taxi squad ahead of the road trip. Fogarty, 27, has five goals with three assists for eight points in 10 games with the Rochester Americans. Fogarty is the Amerks captain and has appeared in one game with the Sabres, logging 8:28 of ice time during a loss to the New York Islanders on Feb. 15.

## **Inside the NHL: NCAA bracket announcement could mark start of Sabres coach search**

By Mike Harrington  
The Buffalo News  
March 21, 2021

The NCAA hockey tournament bracket is released at 7 p.m. Sunday on ESPNU and it will be interesting to see what the result is for Providence after it lost to UMass in the Hockey East semifinals on Wednesday.

While the Friars are hoping for an at-large berth, they seem to be on the outside of the bracket. If they don't make it and their season is thus deemed complete, that could get Sabres General Manager Kevyn Adams moving in his head coach search if he wants to pursue Providence coach Nate Leaman.

Adams has a background in college hockey from his days at Miami (Ohio) and Leaman, or any college coach, would come much cheaper than the big-name NHLers out there like Bruce Boudreau, Gerard Gallant or Claude Julien. Same for any potential coaches who become free agents like Columbus' John Tortorella, Carolina's Rod Brind'Amour or Vancouver's Travis Green.

Leaman seems to be the top college name on the minds of most NHL observers, particularly since he directed Team USA to the gold medal at the World Junior Championships in January with a shutout of Dylan Cozens-led Canada in the gold medal game in Edmonton. He coached Providence to a national championship in 2015, beating Jack Eichel-led Boston University in the championship game and brought a Providence team that included current Sabres defenseman Jacob Bryson to Buffalo for the Frozen Four in 2019.

My choice would be for Adams to hire an experienced NHL coach. After all, how many first-timers is this organization going to hire? But it would likely take a five-year contract at big money to get a name retread in here, given the current state of disarray the franchise is in. Hard to see that happening with Ralph Krueger now being paid more than \$5 million not to coach between now and the end of next season.

NBCSN's Bob McKenzie said on the air last week he expects Adams to direct a "massive" search and it will include his new assistant GM, whether that's former Carolina/Pittsburgh aide Jason Karmanos or someone else. It makes sense the GM wouldn't do this without more eyes and ears involved in the process. But Adams promised the search would start immediately when he met the media on Wednesday and it stands to reason that Leaman would get an early call.

Marching on to nowhere

Thursday's loss to the Bruins put the Sabres' bizarre streak of March futility up to an incredible 30 straight games in the month without a regulation win and to 3-24-3 overall in that span.

The Sabres' last regulation win in March was their 7-4 victory at Nashville on March 31, 2018 – nearly three years ago! Since then, they went 2-12-2 in March 2019 at the disastrous end of Phil Housley's run as coach, 1-3-0 last year before the season was ended and are 0-9-1 this year.

The three wins are all against marquee teams, by shootout last year over Washington and by shootout over St. Louis in 2019 and overtime over Pittsburgh in '19.

Miller time

Props to old friend Ryan Miller, who posted his 390th career win in the Ducks' 3-2 overtime triumph over Arizona. It moved the 40-year-old into 14th place all-time – one win ahead of Dominik Hasek, whom he replaced in Buffalo in 2002.

"I appreciate it. I'd like to have the trophies he's got," Miller said earlier this month of Hasek, who garnered some Harts, Vezinas and Stanley Cups. "But it meant a lot for me to carve out my own place for the Sabres and then carve out my own place in the league. I'm happy I've been able to play hockey at a high level with a lot of solid players around me."



Miller is the all-time victory leader among American goalies. Asked Thursday if he's casting a shadow for them the way Hasek cast a shadow over him at the start of his Buffalo career, Miller joked, "I'm pretty skinny. It's not as much of a shadow."

"I'm just trying to enjoy and play. I think the evaluation of what I've done on the ice I can get more into later," Miller said. "I just want to keep being in the moment right now. I'm proud to be an American player and I hope that I have set a standard because I'm proud of the way I played in my career. I'm really trying to hold on to this moment right now and keep having fun on the ice, try and help the boys win some games."

Amerks coach Seth Appert has had quite an introduction to pro hockey with the truncated AHL season, Rochester's Covid-19 outbreak and now an invitation to serve on the Sabres' bench Thursday night while new interim assistant Dan Girardi was going through his intake quarantine. Prior to Krueger's dismissal, Appert said last week he hasn't spent a lot of time focused on the Sabres' issues.

"My job is to coach the Rochester Americans and to develop players to help our franchise move in a more positive direction," Appert said. "My job isn't to worry about Buffalo or to be focused on them. Kevyn Adams and I have regular communication about things that we're doing, things that we need to improve on here, both from an individual player perspective and a team perspective. So our focus has been completely on the Rochester Americans."

Appert said he had an open dialogue with Krueger that decreased some "as the ferocity and intensity of the game schedule has increased." In addition to Adams, he said he's regularly in contact with development director Matt Ellis, scouting director Jeremiah Crowe and Mark Jakubowski, the team's VP of hockey administration and former assistant GM. With no assistant GM running the Amerks like Randy Sexton had done in recent years, there's not one direct contact for Appert and he said he's gotten into more areas of the game than he expected.

Said Appert: "I think I'm real fortunate that in my first year in pro ... that's allowed me to be part of conversations and important discussions that have widened my knowledge."

- The Sabres have scored nine goals in losing their last six games. For some bizarre perspective to that, Friday was the 40th anniversary of the night the Sabres scored nine goals in a single period. On March 19, 1981, the Sabres throttled Toronto, 14-4. They turned a 1-0 lead after 20 minutes into a 10-3 advantage through 40.

Their nine goals remain an NHL record for a period and so do the teams' 12 goals combined in the frame. Andre Savard and Gil Perreault both had hat tricks in the game, and Savard had six points.

- Yes, the Sabres are a dumpster fire. No, those words are not befitting a professional broadcaster on another team. Boston's Jack Edwards denigrated the Sabres in that manner leading off the NESN broadcast on Thursday and it was a cheap shot.

Edwards is not a media member whose job is commentary. He's a representative of a franchise and a television network that is a league rightsholder. Gratuitous trashing of other franchises in that manner as part of his broadcast – even if you can't argue the point – shouldn't be part of his act.

- Show of hands of those who had Jonas Johansson on your bingo card as the first Sabres player traded by Adams. Anyone? Thought so. Repeating what I said last week: Does Colorado have scouts?

- Here's quite a nugget pointed out by Devils beat reporter Chris Ryan of the Newark Star-Ledger. In their 26th game last season, the Devils suffered a 7-1 loss to the Sabres and fired coach John Hynes the next day. In their 26th game this season, the Devils posted a 3-2 win over the Sabres – and it was Buffalo who fired the coach, sending Krueger packing on Wednesday.

- The last goal scored by the Sabres under Krueger? Of all people, it was by Jeff Skinner in the second period Tuesday night in New Jersey. Somehow, that's perfect for all the wackiness of this season.

## **Trade deadline the first step in Sabres GM Kevyn Adams' plan to evaluate roster**

By Lance Lysowski

The Buffalo News

March 21, 2021

In the aftermath of yet another coaching change in April 2019, Rasmus Ristolainen stood inside the Sabres' dressing room, surrounded by reporters with a stoic expression on his face, and called for more accountability among his teammates.

The scene Friday afternoon at KeyBank Center was far different. Ristolainen sat in front of a Sabres backdrop, talking to the media via video conference call following interim coach Don Granato's first practice as coach. Ristolainen's opinion, though, was the same: It's on the players, not the coach, to end the cycle of losing.

"I mean, I can see why the decision was made (to fire Ralph Krueger)," said Ristolainen, a 26-year-old defenseman in his eighth season in Buffalo. "It's business. I've been here. I've seen so many coaching changes, GM changes, but especially like most of the coaching changes we've had here, I feel like it's more about players. But you can't fire players, so then it's always coach having to take the blame."

Sabres General Manager Kevyn Adams is faced with the same problem that his predecessors weren't given enough time to solve: What is the right mix of players to push this franchise into the playoffs for the first time since 2011? The team is last in the NHL with 16 points, and Granato will have one more practice to prepare for the Sabres' game Monday at Madison Square Garden against the New York Rangers.

Adams already has a pulse on what goes on behind the scenes. Since NHL protocols prevented Adams from operating out of his usual office at KeyBank Center, he spent the first half of this season working out of a small room down the hall from the Sabres' dressing room.

As Adams meticulously evaluated the innerworkings of the team amid a losing streak that's now reached 13 games, he learned there isn't a "toxic" atmosphere. Good vibes don't translate to wins, though. Any semblance of a team identity has been lost through the turnover in coaching and management the past 10 years.

"I talk about this team and this town, we need to have an identity moving forward and build this team where players love playing, they compete hard, the fans love watching it and it's all connected," Adams said. "I know, I've seen it in this town before. I know what that does for our fan base, and I understand that and we're not there."

Whoever coaches the Sabres next season will have a significant impact on results, as we learned from Krueger's second and final season. However, the state of this roster – expiring contracts, underperforming core players, prospects in the pipeline, etc. – is going to make this a difficult offseason for Adams.

Help is on the way, as Adams told the media Wednesday that he will soon hire an assistant general manager. Sources told The Buffalo News that Jason Karmanos, a longtime assistant general manager under Jim Rutherford in Pittsburgh and Carolina, is Adams' top candidate.

Any hire likely won't be around to help Adams navigate the April 12 trade deadline. Sources say Adams' focus is on unloading expiring contracts, not "hockey trades" that will include the swap of significant NHL players. He will be able to add prospects and/or draft picks from playoff contenders in exchange for Taylor Hall, Eric Staal and Brandon Montour. Tobias Rieder and Riley Sheahan may also draw interest because they are versatile forwards at a low cost.

The roster evaluation in the coming weeks will extend beyond those pending unrestricted free agents. Adams must prepare for the Seattle expansion draft, which is scheduled for Wed., July 21 and will have the following guidelines:

- Each team will have the option to protect seven forwards, three defensemen and one goalie, or eight skaters and one goalie
- First- and second-year professionals, as well as unsigned draft picks, are exempt.

- All players with a no-movement clause must be protected, unless they voluntarily agree to waive.

Adams must decide which players under contract beyond this season fit into his long-term plan. The Sabres will likely receive calls this offseason on some of their core players, including Jack Eichel and Sam Reinhart. There might be more trade rumors involving Ristolainen, whose contract expires after the 2021-22 season. Ristolainen, a minus-158 in 515 career games in Buffalo, called Krueger the "best coach" he's played for and appeared to be on his way out in the summer of 2019. Those sort of "hockey trades" will have to wait until this summer, when teams have more cap space.

"We have half of the season left so, I mean, I don't think that's a question I should probably answer too much right now," Ristolainen said Friday when asked if he wants a change of scenery. "I'm here, I'm a Buffalo Sabre player and I'm in this with the guys and we want to turn it around and I want to turn it around. So, that's the answer for you."

The trade deadline will create holes in the Sabres' roster, providing Adams with an opportunity to elevate prospects from the Rochester Americans to the NHL. Playing out the string under an interim coach in a 10th consecutive non-playoff season isn't an ideal environment for player development, but management needs to evaluate who can help this team next season.

Forward Arttu Ruotsalainen, unlike most prospects, has extensive professional experience. The 24-year-old was leading Finland's Liiga in scoring when his loan agreement ended in December. The Sabres could use a center with Ruotsalainen's experience after Staal is inevitably traded.

Adams will need to prioritize evaluating the Sabres' goaltending. Linus Ullmark, 27, has been solid when starting the past two seasons, but he has missed time with lower-body injuries. Trading Jonas Johansson for a 2021 sixth-round pick to the Colorado Avalanche on Saturday will now allow the Sabres to give top prospect Ukko-Pekka Luukkonen some NHL games in the second half of the season. Luukkonen, 21, is not ready for a full-time NHL job, but he would benefit from an introduction to playing the pressure-packed position at the highest level.

You will also see more playing time for young players on the NHL roster, particularly defenseman Henri Jokiharju and winger Tage Thompson, a 23-year-old who played under Granato at the USA Hockey National Team Development Program. Thompson is under contract for two more years and has shown flashes of promise during his 14 games this season.

According to CapFriendly.com, the Sabres are projected to have \$34.95 million in cap space this summer. Ullmark, Hall, Staal, Montour, Rieder, Sheahan, Jake McCabe and Carter Hutton are among the pending unrestricted free agents. Reinhart, Jokiharju, Rasmus Dahlin and Casey Mittelstadt are pending restricted free agents.

The first step, though, will be unloading expiring contracts in exchange for assets that could help the Sabres build under their new coach.

"Absolutely, this is my job to make sure not only that I'm proactive, but listen as well and doing everything I can to move this thing forward," Adams said.

## **Sabres trade goalie Jonas Johansson to Colorado for 6th-round draft pick**

By Lance Lysowski

The Buffalo News

March 20, 2021

Sabres General Manager Kevyn Adams kicked off what will likely be a flurry of trades Saturday by dealing goalie Jonas Johansson to the Colorado Avalanche in exchange for a sixth-round draft pick in 2021.

Johansson, a 25-year-old selected in the third round by Buffalo in 2014, was held out of practice Friday in KeyBank Center with the Sabres finalizing details on the trade with Colorado, multiple sources told The Buffalo News. Adams did not complete the move until goalie Michael Houser cleared waivers and the Sabres received more information on how they may be impacted by the Boston Bruins having four players added to the Covid protocol list.

On the surface, it may seem odd for the Sabres to part ways with a young goaltender when the organization is thin at the position. Top prospect Ukko-Pekka Luukkonen is in Rochester and still likely one year away from a full-time NHL job. Sabres starting goalie Linus Ullmark is still out with a lower-body injury.

However, Johansson struggled in his seven appearances with the Sabres this season, compiling an .884 save percentage and 0-5-1 record. He will also become an unrestricted free agent this summer if he does not log 21 NHL appearances of at least 30 minutes.

The Avalanche likely view Johansson as important depth on the taxi squad and a prospect the organization can evaluate to be the No. 3 goalie next season.

The trade leaves Carter Hutton and Dustin Tokarski as the Sabres' two healthy goalies on the roster and taxi squad. Houser, a 28-year-old whose only professional experience has been in the ECHL and AHL, signed an NHL deal with Buffalo and cleared waivers Saturday. This will allow Houser to be assigned to the taxi squad, which is likely a temporary move until Ullmark returns from the injury that's kept him out of the lineup since Feb. 25.

Hutton, a 35-year-old pending unrestricted free agent, is 1-10-1 this season with a 3.48 goals-against average and .885 save percentage. Tokarski, meanwhile, is 31 years old and has not appeared in an NHL game since the 2016-17 season. In 34 career NHL appearances, Tokarski has logged a .904 save percentage. He is a two-time AHL Calder Cup champion (2012 and 2019) and was selected to the AHL All-Star Game in 2013-14.

Johansson's development was impacted by injuries since his draft year, including season-ending knee surgery in 2019-20. He made a remarkable comeback last season, earning all-star honors in the AHL while compiling a .921 save percentage in 22 appearances with the Amerks. Johansson made his NHL debut last season, earning his first NHL win by making 25 saves against the Winnipeg Jets on Feb. 23.

Johansson was given a one-year contract by the Sabres in October, but he was a victim of circumstance this season. Rather than receiving important playing time in Rochester, Johansson was relegated to the taxi squad and did not start a game until Ullmark was injured last month.

Buffalo also planned for Luukkonen to play in Rochester and added Tokarski on a two-year contract, thus making it clear this was likely Johansson's last season with the Sabres.

## **Sabres' game Saturday postponed as 4 more Bruins enter Covid-19 protocols**

By Lance Lysowski

The Buffalo News

March 19, 2021

Don Granato stepped off the KeyBank Center ice Friday afternoon to learn that his second game as interim coach of the Buffalo Sabres will have to wait.

The game scheduled for Saturday against Boston in KeyBank Center was postponed because four additional Bruins players -- forwards David Pastrnak, David Krejci, Craig Smith and Jake DeBrusk -- entered the National Hockey League's Covid-19 protocols Friday morning. The Sabres did not have anyone placed on the protocol list Friday.

A player can be added to the protocol list for an unconfirmed positive test, a positive test or because he is deemed a high-risk close contact.

The Sabres played the Bruins on Thursday night in Buffalo, and neither team held a morning skate out of an abundance of caution because each side had a possible Covid-19 case.

A Sabres hockey staff member entered the NHL's protocol, and Bruins forward Sean Kuraly landed on the protocol list hours before puck drop. Both teams conducted contact tracing and rapid testing, the results of which led medical experts and the NHL to decide the game was safe to play.

The news of the latest postponement was alarming to Granato and his players, as this is the Sabres' second encounter with the virus this season. Nine players entered the protocols following a two-game series against the New Jersey Devils on Jan. 30-31. Former coach Ralph Krueger tested positive for Covid-19 and most Sabres on the list also tested positive. This led to the postponement of six Sabres games.

Defenseman Rasmus Ristolainen was bedridden while enduring multiple symptoms. The outbreak occurred after a Devils player entered the protocols before each of the two games, and it led the NHL to enhance its in-arena protocols, including the removal of Plexiglass behind the benches.

"A lot goes through your mind because of six weeks ago," Granato said after his first practice as interim coach. "We don't have a lot of information yet, so that still goes through your mind. It puts you in a wait-and-see, and nobody likes that. It is challenging."

The Bruins canceled their scheduled practice in LECOM Harborcenter on Friday and their next two games, including Saturday in Buffalo, were postponed. The Bruins did not plan to make any of their players or coach Bruce Cassidy available to speak to the media.

The game scheduled for Saturday was supposed to be the Sabres' first this season with 10% capacity in KeyBank Center. Refunds will be issued for tickets purchased. The team cannot provide immediate refunds for the mandatory Covid-19 tests to attend the game.

The Sabres, though, are compensating fans by providing single-game ticket vouchers for the 2021-22 season. For example, a fan who purchased two tickets to the game Saturday will be given two free tickets to a game next season. Approximately 700 front-line workers attended the Sabres' 4-1 loss to the Bruins on Thursday.

Granato planned to meet with General Manager Kevyn Adams and other members of Sabres hockey operations Friday afternoon to plot next steps. Any plan is contingent on what the team learns from the NHL. The Sabres won't practice Saturday out of an abundance of caution, and their next scheduled game is Monday against the Rangers at Madison Square Garden.

This latest calamity occurred less than 72 hours after Krueger was fired as coach and amid the Sabres' 13-game winless streak. The delay will give Granato more time to prepare for his second game leading the Buffalo bench, but there is a sense of uneasiness as he and his players await word on what's next.

"From what I think, I don't see how it's really much of a different situation than what happened with New Jersey," said Sabres forward Dylan Cozens, who previously tested positive for Covid-19 and was asymptomatic.

"So, there is definitely some nerves in the room. We don't want to get shut down again. That was not fun to have to quarantine and go through. I mean, we're just hoping that it didn't transmit to any of us. But we're just kind of taking it day by day right now."

Any in-game transmission Thursday would raise significant questions about the process to determine if competition is safe after one team has a player or staff member test positive on a game day.

People outside of these NHL teams could also be impacted, including bus drivers, hospitality workers at hotels, arena staff, etc. Erie County Executive Mark Poloncarz, who tweeted his disgust in the aftermath of the series against New Jersey, reacted to this latest development Friday on Twitter by saying, "After the last fiasco, this can't be good."

## **Charlie Mendola is latest departure from Sabres' hockey operations department**

By Lance Lysowski

The Buffalo News

March 19, 2021

One of Kevyn Adams' first hires as the Buffalo Sabres' general manager has already left the team.

Charlie Mendola, who joined the team as director of hockey strategy in November, is no longer with the Sabres, sources confirmed.

The 47-year-old East Amherst native previously worked as assistant general manager at LECOM Harborcenter, where he was tasked with implementing hockey programming for the rink and the Academy of Hockey.

Mendola has also been executive director of the Buffalo Jr. Sabres' Under-20 team in the Ontario Junior Hockey League, and at times, worked as an on-ice coach for the Academy of Hockey.

This creates another vacancy in the Sabres' hockey operations department, which was gutted by 22 firings in June, including General Manager Jason Botterill.

Since taking charge of the department, Adams has made several appointments, including the promotion of Jeremiah Crowe to director of scouting and director of analytics Jason Nightingale stepped into a prominent role in the scouting department. Matt Ellis, previously director at the Academy of Hockey, joined the Sabres as director of player development.

Adams hired two scouts, and former NHL defenseman Dan Girardi was brought on as a development coach. However, Ellis and Girardi are now interim assistant coaches on Don Granato's staff with the Sabres. This has left only one full-time development coach in the department, Seamus Kotyk. In addition to overseeing prospect development, Ellis has also run on-ice skill sessions with the Sabres' taxi squad and players who are out of the lineup.

Additionally, the Sabres do not have scouts based in Finland, Russia, the Western Hockey League or the Ontario Hockey League. Owner Terry Pegula's plan post-Botterill was for the hockey operations department to rely on video scouting and analytics. The department, though, has not hired any full-time employees in analytics, and video scouting isn't an effective method to scout most junior leagues in Europe, particularly Finland and Russia.

Adams might be receiving help soon, as he revealed to the media following Ralph Krueger's firing on Wednesday that the Sabres are seeking an assistant general manager. Industry sources told The Buffalo News that Jason Karmanos, a longtime assistant general manager under Jim Rutherford in Pittsburgh and Carolina, is atop Adams' list of candidates. The Sabres have received permission from the Penguins to interview Karmanos, who was dismissed in October. Rutherford has since resigned as Penguins general manager.

## **Dan Girardi relishing opportunity to help coach Sabres**

By Brayton J. Wilson

WGR 550

March 21, 2021

Just one day after Saturday's matchup with the Boston Bruins was postponed due to COVID-19 protocols, the Buffalo Sabres returned to the ice at KeyBank Center for practice ahead of Monday's matchup with the New York Rangers at Madison Square Garden.

The National Hockey League made the announcement on Friday that Saturday afternoon's game with the Bruins would not be played as scheduled after four Boston players entered the league's COVID-19 protocols after being deemed as close contacts to one player who entered the protocols just before Thursday night's game in Buffalo.

Like the Bruins on Thursday morning, the Sabres canceled their morning skate after the team had a hockey staff member enter the league's protocols. Luckily for the organization, no one else has been forced to enter the NHL's COVID-19 Protocols since Thursday, even after playing the Bruins later that evening.

With the team returning to practice on Sunday, interim head coach Don Granato feels the group is confident that they are safe to return to work and carry on with the season as scheduled.

"I don't see any concern at this point, certainly none that's going to disrupt what we're doing and what we want to do and lay out as a staff," Granato said following Sunday's practice.

"Initially I had concern with [the group's concerns about Thursday and Friday]. That was what I wanted to see the answer in, and I was looking for that answer through body language and response. It was great. We spoke of it, we informed them what had happened, that our game had been canceled, and that was in the middle of [Friday's] practice. I asked what the comfort level was to continue, because when this happened weeks ago everybody had great concern of, 'Is this within our group now?' and where's it going? The players collectively wanted to continue practicing, and they continued to practice at a very intense level. So that was a great response from the standpoint of if you wanted them to be focused and engaged, they were."

The players were back working at a really good pace again for Sunday's session. It was another high-tempo practice for the group, as they are looking to snap a 13-game winless streak that has sent the 2020-21 season into a complete tailspin.

For the first time in a while, the Sabres were able to have more than just one day off from game action, given that Saturday's game with the Bruins was postponed. It allowed the players to get a bit more of a refresher heading into Monday's action with the Rangers.

"It felt really good getting on the ice, getting a nice full practice in," said forward Tage Thompson. "We've had two full practice days, plus a day in-between yesterday, so there's no excuses heading into tomorrow. We've had two really good days at practice and some time in-between there to rest. I think just mentally gearing up for tomorrow is the focus going in, but physically, we're ready to go."

For new interim assistant coach Dan Girardi, Sunday was really his first good chance to get to really know his group of players he'll be working with for the rest of the season. The longtime NHL defenseman did not get the chance to coach Thursday night due to quarantine issues, but he's already looking forward to being behind the bench for his first game on Monday.

"I think it's a good opportunity for me to come in," Girardi said following Sunday's practice. "A guy that's only been out of the game a year-and-a-half and has followed it really closely. A fresh perspective that's from the outside and someone the guys can kind of relate to. A lot of the the guys obviously know me from playing against me and kind of know what attitude I bring and how I played. I do like to keep it light a little bit; obviously the situation we come into here is a little tough, but you can't worry about all that with what happened."

"We're very excited about the opportunity that's coming Monday at MSG [Madison Square Garden]. It's kind of a fresh little start here. ... I think it's the first time we'll have the full staff on the bench, and have a good feeling here after a good two days of practice, really nailing some things home."



Girardi was hired as a player development coach for the Sabres just this past offseason after recently retiring in 2019. The 36-year-old played in 927 career games with the Rangers and Tampa Bay Lightning, where he was well-known for his gritty defensive play and willingness to block shots.

That style of play, plus the experiences he had to get to the NHL and sustain a long career at the top level, is just part of what Girardi believes will help him transition to a coaching career in the NHL.

"I've kind of been through everything," Girardi said. "The way I played, how I carried myself in the [locker] room, a teammate first, didn't worry about all my individual stuff, really thought about the team game; all those things, when you're a good teammate, word gets around and you're able to talk to guys. Obviously I'm the assistant coach now, an interim assistant coach, but I'm talking to guys now like I'm just out there with them at practice and talking about random things, chirp here and there. But just get a good feeling between all of us and get a better feeling back in the building and in the room, a positive atmosphere. We're going to have to put the work boots on to get out of this thing with everyone. Myself, Matt [Ellis], Donnie [Granato], we're going to have to pull these guys in the right direction."

That type of atmosphere that Girardi brings to the ice as a coach is something that Granato believes will be a tremendous help to not only the players but to the entire group going forward.

"If you think about it from my side, when I'm pushing and demanding, he is fresh in his mind what it was like after 25 games and after two games in two nights, what the body feels like, what the mind may feel like with respect to any demand we may put on," Granato said of his assistant coach. "He's a great resource for our entire staff, as well as the players themselves. I will absolutely be leaning on him, in that regard."

"You want to put people in positions of strength, whether it'd be players or any members of your staff. ... I feel his strengths are the ability to have a stronger connection to those players in our locker room who are blocking shots, that are sore after blocking shots, and making plays. He is a great addition to our staff."

While he has not gotten much time to work with the defensive group in place in Buffalo, on top of the group changing a bit due to injury and other circumstances, Girardi believes there's a lot of potential going forward for a positive turnaround.

"I think there's a really good mix of talent. We have eight solid [defensemen], which not a lot of teams have that ability to maybe interchange a guy in and out if things aren't going great," Girardi said. "I think with the guys we have; obviously [Jake] McCabe's injury earlier is a big miss for us, but we've had guys who have come up; [Jacob] Bryson has come in and played great. It's going to be finding the right pairs, finding the right chemistry, and that's something that I'll get better at as time goes, but I really like our [defensive] corps."

"The way we're going to try to be playing is everyone's going to be on the same page, and it should make everyone's job easier that everyone's going to know where they're supposed to be. We're pretty mobile back there, which is nice, so we're able to close better gaps, hopefully, and create some more offense."

Meanwhile, the Sabres could potentially get some good news later in the week with the status of starting goalie Linus Ullmark, who has been out of the lineup since the start of this 13-game winless streak with a lower-body injury.

"Linus, at this point, we're planning on him joining us on the trip, which is great news," said Granato. "We need to integrate him into practice, at some point. That's the next step here. At that point, we can evaluate when a potential return is. That's all good news with Linus."

Ullmark's potential return could spark a nice turnaround from the team, which has gotten some questionable goaltending in this stretch. Whether it was Carter Hutton or Jonas Johansson in goal, the team has gone 0-11-2 with 54 goals-against and just 20 goals scored. Not every loss has been on the goaltending, but there have been plenty of instances where when the team needs a big save, it hasn't come from whoever is in net.

However, the team will no longer have the services of Johansson after he was traded to the Colorado Avalanche on Saturday for a sixth round pick in the 2021 NHL Draft.

With Johansson off to Colorado, the team has officially called up goalie Dustin Tokarski from the taxi squad, while also loaning goalie Michael Houser to the taxi squad. Houser was signed to a NHL contract on Friday.

Also, with the Rochester Americans back to practice after having to quarantine due to a minor COVID-19 outbreak in the organization, the Sabres were able to call up Steven Fogarty on Sunday and assign him to the taxi squad.

Here's how the lines looked on Sunday:

Forwards:

Hall - Cozens - Reinhart  
Olofsson - Staal - Thompson  
Skinner - Lazar - Mittelstadt  
Asplund - Sheahan - Okposo

Defense:

Bryson - Ristolainen  
Dahlin - Miller  
Jokiharju - Montour  
Irwin - Davidson

Tobias Rieder and Cody Eakin were the extra skaters, while taxi squaders C.J. Smith and Steven Fogarty also rotated in.

The Sabres will travel to New York City on Monday morning ahead of the evening's matchup with the Rangers. It'll be a 7 p.m. ET faceoff at Madison Square Garden with pregame coverage with Mike Schopp and the Bulldog on WGR getting underway at 6 p.m. ET.

## **Sabres trade goaltender Jonas Johansson to Colorado**

By Joe DiBiase

WGR 550

March 20, 2021

The Buffalo Sabres signed goaltender Michael Houser to a NHL contract on Friday morning, signifying that there could be a move coming in net.

That move came Saturday afternoon with the Sabres trading goaltender Jonas Johansson to the Colorado Avalanche for a sixth round pick in the 2021 NHL Draft.

Lance Lysowski of The Buffalo News was the first to report the pending Johansson trade on Friday after he was not on the ice for practice at KeyBank Center.

Sportsnet hockey insider Elliotte Friedman had said in the past that Johansson's name was garnering interest around the NHL, and he brought his name back up again on Friday. Friedman specifically mentioned the Colorado Avalanche as a team that had looked into his services before.

The 25-year-old was the Sabres' third round pick (61st overall) in the 2014 NHL Draft.

Johansson played 13 games in the last two seasons, compiling a record of 1-8-2. In his time with the Sabres, Johansson put up a goals-against average of 3.40 and an .888 save percentage.

Although Johansson has struggled in his limited time in the NHL, his play with the Rochester Americans, perhaps, have him some value to a team looking for a better third goalie. In the 2019-20 season, Johansson had a .921 save percentage in 22 games for the Amerks, which led to him being an AHL All-Star.

## **New coach Don Granato got to work in first practice with Sabres**

By Paul Hamilton

WGR 550

March 19, 2021

Buffalo, N.Y. (WGR 550) – Not only were the Buffalo Sabres on the ice for their first practice with new head coach Don Granato, they also found out on Friday that their game Saturday against the Bruins has been postponed due to four Boston players entering the NHL's COVID-19 Protocols. Added to the Protocol list on Friday were David Pastrnak, David Krejci, Craig Smith and Jake DeBrusk. No Sabres players were added to Friday's list.

Sean Kuraly went into league protocol on Thursday morning, but rapid testing and contact tracing allowed the game to be played between the Bruins and Sabres.

It's important to point out that the players entering the protocols on Friday could be close contacts to Kuraly. That would be the best possible scenario for the Sabres, which would mean they likely would be able to proceed with business as usual.

This is not ideal circumstances for Granato to come into, and he doesn't even know if he can practice on Saturday.

"There would be an option to wait a day. I mean take a day to wait it out, and I think we're leaning that way," Granato said after Friday's practice.

Granato adds he needs to meet with general manager Kevyn Adams to decide what's best for the organization.

The Sabres, of course, had to pause their season for two weeks after getting forced into playing the New Jersey Devils, who already had multiple players test positive for the virus. Granato acknowledged that it's weighing on them wondering if this is happening again.

"It's interesting. A lot goes through your mind because of six weeks ago, and we don't have a lot of information yet. But it still goes through your mind and it puts you in the wait and see and nobody likes that," Granato said.

Many felt Thursday's game should've been postponed due to Kuraly's positive test and a Sabres hockey staffer going into the protocol.

"I believe there was talk of not playing, but the information we had in the end was that it was clear," Granato said.

Dylan Cozens was back at practice after leaving a game March 11 with a concussion. He said the players are a little on edge about the COVID-19 stuff after what they've already been through this year.

"I don't really see how it's much of a different situation than what happened with New Jersey," the rookie forward said after practice. "There is definitely some nerves in the room as we don't want to get shutdown again, quarantine and go through that, so we're just hoping it didn't translate to any of us."

Cozens looked very good in practice and said he felt 100%.

"Dylan, we expect back," Granato said of Cozens. "Today was a good practice to get him toward that game conditioning, so I would expect Dylan back in our next game."

Granato had no update on captain Jack Eichel.

Cozens was hit from the front by Pittsburgh Penguins forward Zach Aston-Reese, but the check originated about six feet from the boards.

"I don't think it was too bad, but I think that falls under the definition of boarding," Cozens said of the hit. "I just wasn't really expecting it. I think he expected me to lean into it a little bit, but the way I went into the boards from that distance, it's a dangerous hit. I think it's unnecessary, but at the same time he's finishing his check."

Rasmus Ristolainen has called Ralph Krueger the best coach he's ever player for. Ristolainen has seen many coaches get fired in his time here, and this time didn't surprise him.

"I can see why the decision was made," the Sabres defenseman said on Friday. "It's business, but most of the coaching changes we've had here I feel like it's more about players. But you can't fire players, so as always, the coach has to take the blame."

Ristolainen has spent most of this season playing the best hockey of his career. He said there certainly is a reason why.

"What helps my game is how the team plays around me and how we play as a group. When everyone is on the same page, we trust each other and we know what we're doing and that helped me. But in the past, more or less our game has been a mess, and it's hard to play in the mess."

The NHL Trade Deadline is coming up on April 12, and Ristolainen was asked if he's had enough and wants to leave. He doesn't think now's the time to speak on that.

"We have half of the season left, so I don't think that's a question I should probably answer right now," Ristolainen said. "I'm a Buffalo Sabre, and I'm in this with the guys. We want to turn it around, and I want to turn it around."

For the first time since I watched Lindy Ruff put his team through practice, I saw a fast pace to every drill and it made the practice sharp and more intense.

Granato even finished with some competing drills that included contact, which was something Rasmus Ristolainen thought this team desperately needed. Granato liked what he saw.

"I don't know how they felt, but I felt good about it," he said. "They did push and they need to push, and we'll continue to push harder and press more."

Granato said he was told to keep Jonas Johansson off the ice. Granato said Johansson had not been traded.

NHL Network analyst Kevin Weekes reported that Colorado is close to a trade to acquire the goalie.

Friday's lines:

Forwards:

Skinner – Lazar – Mittelstadt

Hall – Cozens – Reinhart

Olofsson – Staal (Eakin) – Thompson

Asplund – Sheahan – Okposo

Rieder – Smith

Defense:

Bryson – Ristolainen

Dahlin – Miller

Jokiharju – Montour

Irwin – Davidson

## **Sabres' Saturday matchup with Bruins postponed due to COVID-19 protocols**

By Brayton J. Wilson

WGR 550

March 19, 2021

The National Hockey League announced Friday that Saturday afternoon's matchup between the Buffalo Sabres and the Boston Bruins has been postponed. This comes after four more Bruins players entered the NHL's COVID-19 Protocols on Friday, upping their overall list to five.

No make up date has been announced yet for Saturday's game.

Both the Sabres and Bruins were forced to cancel their morning skates on Thursday after having members of each organization enter the NHL's COVID-19 Protocols. The Sabres had a team staff member enter the league's protocols, while Boston had their first player go into the league's protocols.

Despite both teams having people enter COVID-19 protocols before the game, NHL doctors decided that Thursday's game would be played as scheduled at KeyBank Center. The Bruins ended up beating the Sabres, 4-1, handing Buffalo a 13th-straight loss in the process.

In addition to Saturday's contest being postponed, the Bruins will also not play their scheduled Tuesday matchup with the New York Islanders as a result of their potential COVID-19 outbreak.

As for the Sabres, the team has already been forced to pause its 2020-21 season after a COVID-19 outbreak swept through the organization back in early February. During that time, nine players and other staff members either tested positive for the virus, or were deemed as close contacts of those who did test positive. Among the staff members who did test positive for COVID-19 was former head coach Ralph Krueger, who was relieved of his duties on Wednesday.

Sabres reporter John Vogl reports that the four Boston that have entered the NHL's COVID-19 Protocols have been deemed as close contacts. However, Vogl also says the Sabres are, once again, upset they were given the ok to play after an opposing team had a player enter COVID-19 protocols, followed by more players from that team entering protocols.

Buffalo is next scheduled to play on the road in New York against the Rangers on Monday. Faceoff at Madison Square Garden is set for 7 p.m. ET on the radio home of the Sabres - WGR Sports Radio 550.

## **Krueger 'loved every minute' of tenure as head coach in Buffalo**

By Brayton J. Wilson

WGR 550

March 19, 2021

It's fair to say that the Ralph Krueger tenure in Buffalo did not work out all that well for the Sabres.

After just 97 games as head coach, going 36-49-12 in parts of two seasons, Krueger was fired on Wednesday by general manager Kevyn Adams after the Sabres got out to an awful 6-18-4 start in the 2020-21 shortened season. Buffalo was also riding a 12-game winless streak at the time of the firing, which has since grown to 13 games after a 4-1 loss to the Boston Bruins on Thursday.

Despite being fired in the midst of the season, Krueger seems to have no hard feelings towards the Sabres and the City of Buffalo.

Just hours after the firing on Wednesday, TSN hockey insider Pierre LeBrun shared a text conversation he had with the former Sabres head coach. When asked about his brief time in Buffalo, Krueger was nothing but class, as usual, in his response:

Krueger was hired as head coach of the Sabres in May of 2019 after serving as a chairman for the Southampton Football Club in the English Premier League for five years.

In his first season as head coach of the Sabres, Krueger led the team to a 30-31-8 record in 69 games before the season was shut down due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The team finished the 2019-20 campaign in sixth place in the Atlantic Division standings, while missing out on the NHL's Return To Play plan by three points as the 12-seed in the Eastern Conference.

The 61-year-old had previous head coaching experience in the National Hockey League with the Edmonton Oilers during the 2012-13 lockout shortened season. In 48 games as head coach in Edmonton, Krueger led his team to a 19-22-7 record and 45 points in the standings.

Assistant coach Don Granato was named as Krueger's replacement behind the bench on Wednesday on an interim basis.

With their 6-19-4 overall record, the Sabres continue to sit in last place in the NHL standings with just 16 points and a points percentage of .276.

The Sabres will return to game action on Saturday afternoon against the Bruins for a 1 p.m. ET faceoff at KeyBank Center. Pregame coverage on WGR gets started at 12 p.m. ET with Brian Koziol.

## **News of latest COVID-19 postponement leaves Sabres with ‘some nerves in the room’**

By John Vogl

The Athletic

March 19, 2021

BUFFALO, N.Y. — In the best-case scenario, the Sabres will have their seventh game postponed by COVID-19.

The worst case is they’ll be shut down again.

The NHL has postponed Saturday’s home game against Boston because of an increasing number of Bruins entering COVID-19 protocols. The Bruins had one player join the list before Thursday’s meeting between the teams, but the total swelled to five Friday. The league has closed the Bruins’ training facility until at least Tuesday.

If this sounds familiar, it should.

The Sabres played New Jersey at the end of January despite the Devils having a player enter protocols. Then another joined. Then the Sabres had nine players and coach Ralph Krueger go into protocols. It forced a two-week shutdown in February.

The Sabres are waiting to see if they’ll have positive tests, more games postponed and get their doors locked, or if this is just a one-game thing.

“A lot goes through your mind because of six weeks ago,” interim coach Don Granato said after Friday’s practice. “We don’t have a lot of information yet, so that still goes through your mind. It puts you in a wait-and-see, and nobody likes that. It is challenging.”

The intrigue started when the Sabres and Bruins canceled their morning skates Thursday, which put their game that night in doubt. Buffalo had a hockey staffer enter protocols while Bruins forward Sean Kuraly went on the NHL list.

After rapid testing results showed no further positives, the league and medical teams gave the go-ahead to the game.

But while the Sabres were practicing Friday at KeyBank Center, the NHL announced the Bruins were being shut down because four more players entered protocols. A source says they have been deemed close contacts of Kuraly, though it’s not clear why that wouldn’t have been the case Thursday, too.

“I don’t see how it’s really much of a different situation than what happened with New Jersey,” said Sabres forward Dylan Cozens, who was a confirmed positive for COVID-19 after the Devils series. “There is definitely some nerves in the room. Like, we don’t want to get shut down again. That was not fun to have to quarantine and go through.

“We’re just hoping that it didn’t transmit to any of us, but we’re just kind of taking it day by day right now.”

Regardless, the Sabres will not play Saturday. They may not even practice.

“We are making a decision on that,” Granato said. “We may take a day to wait it out, which I think we’re leaning that way.”

In a season of chaos in Buffalo, it’s not surprising there’s another layer to the story.

The Sabres were set to welcome the ticket-buying public for the first time Saturday. To attend, fans had to purchase tickets and present a negative PCR test within 72 hours of puck drop. New York State put the testing stipulation in place.

The tickets for the postponed game are refundable through the Sabres, but the patrons are out the \$64 cost of the PCR test, which was handled by an outside company.



The Sabres are doing their best to make things right with the fans who went through the effort to attend Saturday's game. They aren't refunding the test money, but they are including a free ticket to a game next season along with the refund for Saturday's game.

It's just another wild chapter in a season to forget.

## **Sabres believe Dan Girardi's playing experience will help defense corps**

By Bill Hoppe

Olean Times Herald

March 21, 2021

**BUFFALO** – Dan Girardi retired less than two years ago, so the ex-NHL defenseman was a contemporary to many of the Sabres.

If they knew Girardi as a player – despite going undrafted, he enjoyed a stellar 13-year career – they can likely relate to him as an assistant coach.

When the hapless Sabres fired coach Ralph Krueger on Wednesday, they also let go assistant coach Steve Smith. General manager Kevyn Adams wanted a fresh voice for his defensemen, so he moved Girardi, who was in his first season as a development coach, behind the bench.

Following a short quarantine, Girardi, 36, joined the Sabres on Friday and has helped conduct their last two practices.

"I'm talking to guys like I'm just out there with them in practice (as a player), just talking about random things, chirp here and there, just get a good feeling between all of us and get a better feeling back in the building," Girardi said on Zoom call following Sunday's practice inside KeyBank Center.

Ironically, Monday's game is at New York's Madison Square Garden, a building Girardi knows well, having played 11 seasons for the Rangers.

"Going back to MSG, (I) never would have guessed in a million years that the first time I go back there is coaching another team and the first game I'm coaching as well," Girardi said. "It's definitely ... going to be a pretty surreal atmosphere."

Girardi established himself as one of the Rangers' linchpins over his 11 years on Broadway, helping them win 11 playoff series and reach the Stanley Cup final in 2014.

Girardi beat long odds just to crack the NHL, let alone play 927 regular-season games and another 143 playoff contests.

The native of nearby Welland, Ontario, began his pro career in the ECHL, a level below the AHL. But by his second season, 2006-07, he was a regular on a Rangers team that nearly upset the Sabres in the Eastern Conference semifinal.

"I've kind of been through everything," Girardi said.

After the Rangers exercised a buyout on his contract in 2017, Girardi joined the Tampa Bay Lightning for two seasons. He retired in September 2019.

Interim coach Don Granato, whose Sabres have a 13-game losing streak, said Girardi's recent playing experience is "a tremendous help to all of us." He can amplify Granato's message to his team.

"When I'm pushing and demanding, it's fresh in his mind what it was like after 25 games and after two games in two nights and what the body feels like, what the mind may feel like with respect to any demand we may put on them," Granato said. "He's a great resource for our entire staff, as well as the players themselves.

"I will absolutely be leaning on him in that regard. ... He is a great addition to our staff."

Girardi inherited a struggling defense corps he said possesses "a really good mix of talent."

"We have eight solid defense, which not a lot of teams have that, the ability to maybe change a guy in or out if things aren't going great," he said.

Girardi's biggest task will be helping defenseman Rasmus Dahlin, 20, break out of his nine-week funk. Dahlin, the first overall pick in 2018, has regressed in his third NHL season, compiling a league-worst minus-28 rating through 29 games.

Granato said he wants his defense to be "active amongst the group of five." Dahlin, of course, is at his best when he's moving.

As a teenager, the Swede would often control games, grabbing the puck and dazzling all over the ice with it. These days, he rarely seems to have the puck on his stick.

Right away, Girardi learned Dahlin wants to improve.

"He's a really great kid," Girardi said. "He's willing, first day we had him, he's like, 'Hey, anything you got for me, let me know.' He's willing to listen, willing to learn and wants to be taught, which is a great trait to have as a young guy in the league.

"Obviously, it hadn't been the greatest year for him, it's no secret. But he's willing to try anything he can, learn different things and who knows what's going to happen tomorrow for anyone?"

Granato and his staff clearly want to settle the Sabres down, get everyone on the same page and grow out of that.

"We're really focusing on coming tomorrow night and the week moving forward here is getting the team concept, the team game in order – all five guys on the ice working together knowing what the other guy's going to be doing, be predictable," Girardi said.

## **Goalie Linus Ullmark to join Sabres on road trip, start practicing**

By Bill Hoppe

Olean Times Herald

March 21, 2021

**BUFFALO** – The Sabres plan for injured goalie Linus Ullmark to join them on their four-game road trip later this week, interim coach Don Granato said.

The Sabres have imploded without Ullmark, their No. 1 goalie. Their 13-game losing streak began Feb. 25, the game he suffered a lower-body injury.

"We need to integrate him into practice," interim Sabres coach Don Granato said on a Zoom call this afternoon. "At some point, that's the next step here. And at that point, we can evaluate when a potential return is."

Goalies Carter Hutton, Dustin Tokarski and Michael Houser, who was promoted from the practice squad this morning, practiced with the Sabres today inside KeyBank Center.

The Sabres begin their trip Monday against the against the New York Rangers.

## **Sabres trade goalie Jonas Johansson to Avalanche**

By Bill Hoppe

Olean Times Herald

March 20, 2021

The Buffalo Sabres this afternoon traded goalie Jonas Johansson to the Colorado Avalanche in exchange for a sixth-round pick in 2021.

The Sabres held Johansson, 25, out of Friday's practice as they attempted to deal him.

With Johansson gone, Carter Hutton and Dustin Tokarski are the Sabres' top two goalies. Hutton, 35, has a 1-10-1 record this season. Meanwhile, Tokarski, 31, hasn't played in the NHL since a five-minute stint in 2016-17.

A lower-body injury has sidelined starter Linus Ullmark since last month. Top prospect Ukko-Pekka Luukkonen has spent all season as the Rochester Americans' No. 1 goalie.

The Sabres also have Michael Houser, who cleared waivers today after signing a one-year contract Friday. Houser could replace Tokarski as the taxi-squad goalie.

The Sabres gave Johansson a brief look last week, awarding him three consecutive starts so he could experience a heavy workload. He posted a 3.93 goals-against average and an .864 save percentage in three losses.

Those outings apparently convinced the Sabres he was expendable.

Johansson has compiled a 1-8-2 record with a 3.39 goals-against average and an .888 save percentage in 13 career NHL games. He has registered a 0-5-1 mark with a 3.79 goals-against average and an .884 save percentage in seven outings this season.

The 6-foot-5, 220-pound Swede was an AHL All-Star with Rochester last season.

The Sabres drafted Johansson in the third round in 2014, 61st overall.

## **Sabres reportedly close to trading goalie Jonas Johansson**

By Bill Hoppe  
Olean Times Herald  
March 20, 2021

**BUFFALO** – When the Sabres signed minor league goalie Michael Houser to a one-year, \$700,000 contract Friday, it ignited speculation they had another move in the works.

Sure enough, when the Sabres convened for Friday's practice inside KeyBank Center, goalie Jonas Johansson was absent.

The Sabres are close to trading Johansson, according to The Buffalo News. The Swede would likely be dealt to the Colorado Avalanche, NHL Network analyst Kevin Weekes reported.

But the Sabres' uncertain status has held up the deal, according to The News. The NHL postponed this afternoon's game against Boston because four Bruins players who played in Thursday's 4-1 win here were added to the COVID-19 protocol-related absences list. They have five total players on the list.

If any Sabres are put in protocol, the league could postpone more games.

Interim coach Don Granato said the Sabres were leaning toward canceling today's practice. They're scheduled to play a road game Monday against the New York Rangers.

The Sabres gave the 6-foot-5, 220-pound Johansson a brief look last week, awarding him three consecutive starts so he could experience a heavy workload. He posted a 3.93 goals-against average and an .864 save percentage in three losses.

Johansson has compiled a 1-8-2 record with a 3.39 goals-against average and an .888 save percentage in 13 career NHL games. He has registered a 0-5-1 mark with a 3.79 goals-against average and an .884 save percentage in seven outings this season.

The Sabres drafted Johansson in the third round in 2014, 61st overall.

Shortly after signing Houser, 28, the Sabres placed him on waivers, a standard procedure when a player who had an AHL contract inks an NHL deal. Houser has served as Ukko-Pekka Luukkonen's backup with the Rochester Americans this season, playing zero games.

The 6-foot-2, 192-pound Houser spent the previous three seasons with the Cincinnati Cyclones, the Sabres' ECHL affiliate. He attended Buffalo's summer development camp about 10 years ago.

Houser has played most of his career in the ECHL, compiling a 127-57-22 mark with a 2.47 goals-against average, a .915 save percentage and 11 shutouts in 210 career games.

He has posted a 32-26-7 record with a 2.87 goals-against average, a .901 save percentage and three shutouts in 73 career AHL outings.

With No. 1 goalie Linus Ullmark injured and Johansson held out, the Sabres practiced Friday with Carter Hutton and Dustin Tokarski, their taxi-squad netminder.

## **Sabres worried about latest COVID-19 problems: ‘Definitely some nerves’**

By Bill Hoppe  
Olean Times Herald  
March 19, 2021

**BUFFALO** – Finally, after two days of waiting, Don Granato conducted his first practice Friday as interim Sabres coach.

Then shortly after the Sabres departed the ice, the NHL announced this afternoon’s game against Boston at KeyBank Center was postponed because four more Bruins players were added to the league’s COVID-19 protocol-related absences list.

The NHL also postponed Tuesday’s Bruins game against the New York Islanders. Their activities have been paused until at least Wednesday.

The Sabres, who endured a rough two-week COVID-19 pause early last month, are worried. They played the Bruins on Thursday, losing 4-1.

Bruins center Sean Kuraly entered COVID-19 protocol late Thursday afternoon. Now four Bruins who played in Thursday’s game – forwards Jake DeBrusk, David Krejci, David Pastrnak and Craig Smith – have joined Kuraly.

For several hours Thursday, it was unclear if the game would be played. The Sabres postponed their morning skate after a member of their hockey staff entered protocol.

They learned at about 12:45 p.m. the game would be played. It appears now it should’ve been postponed.

Granato said the Sabres were deciding Friday afternoon if they would cancel today’s practice. He said they were leaning toward taking the day off.

The Sabres’ current situation feels eerily similar to what they experienced in late January, when they hosted the New Jersey Devils for a weekend series.

When the teams played Jan. 31, the Devils had six players in COVID-19 protocol, including forward Kyle Palmieri, who had played in the previous afternoon’s game.

Both teams did not play for another two weeks after that game.

“It’s interesting, a lot goes through your mind ... because of six weeks ago,” Granato said on a Zoom call Friday. “We don’t have a lot of information yet.”

Nine Sabres players entered protocol in early February. Seven players and former coach Ralph Krueger, who was fired Wednesday, said they tested positive for COVID-19. Sabres defenseman Rasmus Ristolainen felt so weak battling the virus he struggled to walk up the stairs in his home.

The Sabres have lost 17 of their 19 games, including 13 straight, since their pause ended Feb. 15.

“I don’t see how it’s really much of a different situation that what happened with New Jersey,” said Sabres rookie Dylan Cozens, who tested positive for COVID-19 last month. “So there is definitely some nerves in the room. Like, we don’t want to get shut down again. That was not fun to have to quarantine and go through. I mean, we’re just hoping that it didn’t transmit to any of us. But we’re just kind of taking it day by day right now.”

Granato, whose Sabres are scheduled to play a road game Monday against the New York Rangers, needs to have meetings and practices.

The Sabres had a day off Wednesday. Then they couldn’t gather until 5 p.m. Thursday, just two hours before the game.

So Friday’s practice, which lasted about an hour, was important. It was faster-paced than Krueger’s sessions. The Sabres, whose sloppiness has contributed to their demise, worked on short passing drills.

"I saw more energy out there today," Ristolainen said.

Krueger usually delegated instruction to his assistants. Granato, however, spent time at the white board showing his players what he wanted.

"I felt good about it," Granato said of the session. "They did push and they need to push. That's what we're asking and I'm asking of them is more. The practice was designed that way and we'll continue to try and tweak things to push harder and progress more. There were parts of the practice today that were in good in that regard."

Cozens said the Sabres must "practice like we play."

"You just got to keep those legs and just keep that intensity in practice so that as soon as that puck drops in the first period you're good to go," he said. "I think that's one of the things we talked about."



## **Sabres rookie Dylan Cozens practices, nearing return to lineup**

By Bill Hoppe

Olean Times Herald

March 19, 2021

BUFFALO – Rookie Dylan Cozens, who has missed the last four games recovering from an upper-body injury, practiced this afternoon and should play in the Sabres' next game, interim coach Don Granato said.

"I'm feeling 100 percent again," Cozens said on a Zoom call following his first session back.

The Yukon native returned to his spot on the first line today, centering Taylor Hall and Sam Reinhart.

Cozens hasn't played since Pittsburgh Penguins center Zach Aston-Reese hit him about six feet from the boards on March 11. Cozens, who hit the boards hard, got up slowly and looked woozy skating off the ice.

Reese wasn't penalized for the hit.

"I don't think it was too bad," Cozens said of the hit. "I think that falls under the definition of boarding, though. I just wasn't really expecting it. I think he was expecting me to lean into it a little bit. As you can see, he puts all his weight on it and falls over top of me. But I don't think it was too bad. I do think it was boarding.

"I mean, the way I went into the board from that distance, it's a dangerous hit. I mean, it's unnecessary and it's dangerous, but at the same time, he's just finishing his check."

The Sabres are scheduled to play a road game Monday against the New York Rangers. Saturday afternoon's game against Boston at KeyBank Center was postponed because the Bruins have five players in the NHL's COVID-19 protocol.

## **Sabres make goalie move, sign Michael Houser to one-year contract**

By Bill Hoppe

Olean Times Herald

March 19, 2021

**BUFFALO** – The Sabres have signed goalie Michael Houser to a one-year, \$700,000 contract, the team announced today.

The Sabres placed Houser, 28, on waivers this afternoon, a standard procedure when a player who had an AHL contract inks an NHL deal. Houser has served as Ukko-Pekka Luukkonen's backup this season, playing zero games.

Houser spent the previous three seasons with the Cincinnati Cyclones, the Sabres' ECHL affiliate.

Why did the Sabres suddenly sign Houser? Another goalie move could be made soon. Jonas Johansson, who has played seven games this season, isn't practicing this afternoon inside KeyBank Center.

The 6-foot-2, 192-pound Houser has spent most of his career in the ECHL, compiling a 127-57-22 mark and 11 shutouts in 210 career games.

Houser has compiled a 32-26-7 record in 73 career AHL outings.

## **Buffalo Sabres trade goalie Jonas Johansson to Colorado Avalanche for 2021 sixth-round pick**

By Paul Ross

WKBW

March 20, 2021

BUFFALO, N.Y. (WKBW) — The Buffalo Sabres have traded goalie Jonas Johansson to the Colorado Avalanche for a 2021 sixth-round pick.

Johansson, 25, has played in seven games with the Sabres this season with a 0-5-1 record, along with a 3.79 goals against average and .884 save percentage.

This comes after the Sabres signed goaltender Michael Houser to a one-year deal on Friday.

## **Sabres' game against Boston on Saturday postponed**

By Adam Unger

WKBW

March 19, 2021

BUFFALO, N.Y. (WKBW) — The Buffalo Sabres' first game with ticketed fans in the stands has been postponed to a later date. The Boston Bruins saw four more players added to COVID-19 protocol on Friday.

Joining Sean Kuraly on the list are forwards David Pastrnak, Craig Smith, Jake DeBrusk, and David Krejci.

The Sabres & Bruins played on Thursday despite one Boston player being added to the protocol. Sean Kuraly was absent as Boston handed Buffalo its 13th straight loss. The Bruins' total in COVID-19 protocol is up to five players.

According to the Sabres' FAQ on their website, tickets and related expenses will be refunded. The team can't directly refund the costs for the PCR tests required by New York State.

However, WKBW has confirmed a report by The Athletic that the Sabres are offering ticket-holders for postponed games a free ticket to a game next season. The tickets for 2021-22 are in addition to the refund for Saturday's game.

## **Sabres' Saturday game against Bruins postponed; fans will be refunded**

By Evan Anstey

WIVB

March 19, 2021

BUFFALO, N.Y. (WIVB) — The Sabres game Saturday against Boston has been postponed after four more Bruins players entered the NHL's COVID Protocol.

It's not yet clear when the Sabres will play next after their loss to the Bruins on Wednesday night. The Sabres are currently on a 13-game winless streak.

The Bruins' Tuesday game against the New York Islanders is postponed, too. Right now, depending on test results, the Bruins are planning to get back to practice this coming Wednesday.

Saturday's game was supposed to be the first to feature fans, other than the frontline workers who watched on Wednesday, in the stands.

Fans who had tickets to the game will be refunded for the tickets, and will be given tickets to a game next season.

## **Sabres Trade Jonas Johansson to Avalanche**

Spectrum News

March 20, 2021

BUFFALO, N.Y. — The Sabres are making trades to help their chances in the 2021 NHL Draft this summer.

The team announced it traded goaltender Jonas Johansson to the Colorado Avalanche Saturday in exchange for a sixth-round draft pick.

The 25 year old is 0-5-1 this season, splitting time in goal with Carter Hutton and Linus Ullmark while he recovers from an injury.

The Sabres also signed goaltender Michael Houser to a one-year-contract Friday.

The Sabres next game is Monday night against the New York Rangers.

Saturday's face-off against the Boston Bruins was postponed. Five Bruins players entered the league's COVID-19 protocol just after playing the Sabres Thursday.

## **NHL Postpones Saturday's Sabres Game Due to COVID-19 Protocols**

Spectrum News

March 19, 2021

BUFFALO, N.Y. — A day after the Buffalo Sabres and the Boston Bruins faced off at KeyBank Center, four players on the Bruins have entered the NHL's COVID-19 Protocols list, meaning Saturday's rematch is postponed.

There were questions if Thursday night's game would even happen after a Bruins player and a member of the Sabres staff both entered protocols.

So far there is no word on any more Sabres players being added to the list.

Fans who were tested in order to go to Saturday's game will get a full ticket refund and a ticket to a game next season.

Fans are not expected to be refunded for the required COVID-19 test, which they had to take to be eligible to attend the game.

## **Buffalo is burning. The desperate Sabres need some of that Bills magic to rub off**

By Kevin McGran

Toronto Sun

March 19, 2021

Things got so bad in Buffalo this week, the Buffalo News had the Sabres 32nd in its weekly NHL Power Rankings.

That's one spot below a team that hasn't played: the expansion Seattle Kraken.

The team quit on coach Ralph Krueger, who got fired.

Jack Eichel is on his fourth coach (Dom Granato) and third general manager (Kevyn Adams) since entering the league in 2015.

Factories and abandoned warehouses don't burn like they used to throughout Buffalo, Tonawanda, Lackawanna and Cheektowaga. Only the Sabres do, to the chagrin of one of the best fan bases in all of sports.

One wonders how the late, great, alliteration-loving newscaster Irv Weinstein would have reported this. "Sad-sack Sabres ignite Buffalo blaze: Coach Krueger caught in carnage. Gambling Granato can guide group back."

OK, maybe that's overdoing things, but it does appear that there's a little black cloud over the Buffalo Sabres — losers of 13 straight games heading into the weekend.

- Leafs fans, if you haven't gotten over Kerry Fraser's missed high stick by Wayne Gretzky on Doug Gilmour in 1993, just go into the Anchor Bar and say, "Brett Hull's foot was in the crease." Then watch the tears flow over a plate of wings as they reminisce about the 1999 Stanley Cup final.
- The last-place Sabres lost the NHL draft lottery in 2014 (when Aaron Ekblad went No. 1) and 2015 (Connor McDavid) after tanking so blatantly as a means to rebuild under owners Terry and Kim Pegula that the league had to change the rules.
- And last year, they missed the pandemic-expanded playoffs by one point. They were one point behind the Canadiens and due to play Montreal the evening the season was paused in March. One more win and maybe Buffalo's young stars would have had that first taste of what the playoffs are like. Conversely, perhaps Montreal would be going down a different path. Claude Julien might have been fired and replaced by Dominique Ducharme sooner. The free-agent signings and trades both teams made might have been different.

"Both teams were in very different situations," says former Buffalo goalie Marty Biron, now a frequent analyst on Sabres and Canadiens games. "But what happened is, (making the playoffs) gave Montreal a very positive look into the future with the way Jesperi Kotkaniemi played, and the way Nick Suzuki played.

"It gave Montreal that perception that they were closer to a being playoff team than last season's standings indicated."

The Sabres, though, still went all-in with big off-season moves indicative of a team that believed it was ready to move forward — including signing Taylor Hall and Eric Staal, to name a couple of now trade-bait possibilities.

The Pegulas' other big sports franchise, the NFL's Bills, was perhaps a bigger tire fire — for even longer — but now looks like a real Super Bowl contender. Biron thinks the Pegulas can do as much for the Sabres as they did for the Bills.

"The Pegulas are trying," Biron says. "They're trying to find the winning recipe for the hockey team. They tried different coaches and they tried different management. They haven't gotten there."

Krueger, ex-GM Jason Botterill and ex-assistant GMs Randy Sexton and Steve Greeley are all being paid till 2022. So the Pegulas are not cheap.

The Sabres won the Rasmus Dahlin lottery in 2018, after another lost season in Buffalo — but not because of tanking. And the consolation prizes in 2015 (Eichel) and 2014 (Sam Reinhart) were pretty good.



"They got the right players in those drafts, at least to be able to build a winner," says Biron. "It just hasn't worked out. So that's the big question mark hanging over the heads of everybody."

Adams has his work cut out for him.

On paper, the core of young players looks strong, from Eichel to rookie Dylan Cozens. The goaltending could be better. But it's hard to imagine the Sabres attracting high-end talent anymore, with the franchise in a state of perpetual turmoil.

"Let's not overcomplicate this," said Adams. "We want to be better, we have to be better and we will be better."

## **Ex-Knights goalie Michael Houser signs one-year deal with Sabres**

By Ryan Pyette

London Free Press

March 19, 2021

Former London Knights goaltender Michael Houser signed a one-year \$700,000 contract with the Buffalo Sabres.

The 28-year-old former Canadian Hockey League goalie of the year will be a backup for Buffalo. The Sabres need to keep three goaltenders at the NHL level this season while allowing up-and-coming Ukko-Pekka Luukkonen to play for their American Hockey League team in Rochester, N.Y.

Ex-Knights goalie Michael Houser signs one-year deal with Sabres

Close sticky video

Houser hasn't appeared in a game this season for Rochester. He's spent the majority of his pro career in the ECHL, most recently with the Cincinnati Cyclones.

The Youngstown, Ohio native played three seasons with the Knights, backstopped London to a 2-1 loss to Shawinigan in the 2012 Memorial Cup final and he is the club's all-time leader with 93 wins.

## **Trade: Avalanche adds goaltending depth, acquires Johansson**

By Sean Leahy

NBC Sports

March 20, 2021

The Avalanche has added to their goaltending depth with the addition of Jonas Johansson.

Johansson was sent to Colorado from the Sabres for a 2021 sixth-round pick.

In 13 career NHL games over the last two seasons, the 25-year-old Johansson has posted an .889 even strength save percentage and earned only one win. His goals saved above average is a -8.40, per Natural Stat Trick.

Johansson, a 2014 draft pick by the Sabres, was an AHL All-Star last season with a 14-4-3 record and .921 save percentage in 22 games with the Rochester Americans.

Colorado needed some depth in goal with Philipp Grubauer handling the majority of work with Pavel Francouz sidelined with a lower-body injury. Grubauer has made 23 of 28 starts this season, with Hunter Miska picking up the other five. Miska has only helped the Avs to one win in five starts and recorded an .856 EESV%.

Miska was not the original plan as No. 2; even Avs head coach Jared Bednar believes he needs more development time.

"It's not an ideal situation," he said this week via The Athletic. "I don't know that he's ready to be an NHL backup at this point, but he's been a good option for us. I just want him to keep working and trying to get better. We're not going to indict him on a couple bad games, nor were we willing to sign him to a five-year deal if he had pitched a shutout. It's just not how we operate."

## How the Sabres current winless streak compares to recent streaks

By Adam Gretz

NBC Sports

March 19, 2021

It has been a tough season for the Buffalo Sabres. They currently find themselves at the bottom of the NHL standings with the league's worst record and on track to miss the playoffs for the 10th consecutive season, a streak that would match the longest in NHL history. That is a record that is currently only held by the Edmonton Oilers from 2007 to 2016, and the Florida Panthers from 2001 to 2011.

Their best player, Jack Eichel, is injured and the subject of trade speculation. They changed coaches for the sixth time in 10 years. Jeff Skinner, their \$9 million winger, has been relegated to fourth line duty and has been a healthy scratch as his goal scoring has completely dried up. And Taylor Hall, their big offseason acquisition, has struggled through the worst offensive season of his career and might be a trade chip over the next month.

Making matters worse is that they find themselves on a 13-game winless streak that is starting to reach historic levels. At least when it comes to recent NHL history.

Longest winless streaks in shootout era

The Sabres current streak is just one game away from matching the longest winless streak in the shootout era (14 games), a mark that has been held by the 2009-10 Carolina Hurricanes, 2010-11 New York Islanders, and the 2014-15 Sabres. Keep in mind that Sabres team was the very early part of their rebuild when fans were actually hoping the team would lose for a chance to get Connor McDavid (they lost that draft lottery and ended up with Eichel).

The 2005-06 St. Louis Blues and 2009-10 Edmonton Oilers are the only other teams in the shootout era that have gone at least 13 games.

So it is pretty rare company to go through a stretch like this.

They are still not likely to reach the all-time record

The good news here is they are not going to reach all-time historic levels of futility, a level that is usually limited to the worst-of-the-worst expansion teams and some Original Six era teams.

Here is the list of longest winless streaks all time.

Winnipeg Jets: 30 Games, 1980-81

Kansas City Scouts: 27 Games, 1975-76

Washington Capitals: 25 Games, 1975-76

New York Rangers: 21, Games, 1943-44

Chicago Blackhawks: 21 Games, 1950-51

Ottawa Senators: 21 Games, 1992-93

When will the Sabres get back in the win column?

The trouble for the Sabres this season is they are not only a flawed team with major question marks at important positions, they are playing an unbalanced schedule in what might be the toughest division in the NHL with several Stanley Cup contenders.

The only team they have beaten since January 27 is the New Jersey Devils, going 3-2-1 against them in six games during that stretch.

Against the rest of the division during that stretch they are 0-16-2.

Their game against Boston on Saturday has been postponed, but after that their next eight games are against the New York Rangers, Pittsburgh Penguins, Bruins, and Philadelphia Flyers. Maybe they get the Rangers? Catch an injured, shorthanded Penguins team? It is going to be a challenge every night.

## **Two Bruins games postponed as four players enter COVID-19 protocol**

By Sean Leahy

NBC Sports

March 19, 2021

The Bruins' games against the Sabres and Islanders have been postponed after four players entered the NHL's COVID-19 protocol on Friday.

Jake DeBrusk, David Krejci, David Pastrnak, and Craig Smith joined Sean Kuraly as the Bruins players on the COVID-19 list.

According to the NHL, pending on test results, Boston may be able to practice again as early as next Wednesday, March 24. Make-up dates for the postponed Bruins games will be announced at a later date.

"The Bruins' organization has, and will continue to follow, all recommended guidelines aimed at protecting the health and safety of its Players, staff and community at large as set by the NHL, local, state and national agencies," read the statement from the NHL.

Thursday's Sabres-Bruins game was originally up in the air after both teams canceled their morning skates. A Buffalo staffer and a Bruins player, later revealed to be Kuraly, entered the league's COVID-19 protocol. The game was played, with Boston coming out on top, 4-1.

Next Tuesday's game against the Islanders was set to be the first with fans inside TD Garden in Boston. They are currently scheduled play again on March 25.

Overall, there have been 42 games postponed this season, with 37 because of COVID-19 protocol.

## **NHL Trade Deadline Primer: Taylor Hall trade would benefit everybody**

By Adam Gretz

NBC Sports

March 19, 2021

The NHL Trade Deadline is Monday, April 12 at 3 p.m. ET. As we get closer to the deadline we will take a look at some individual players who could be moved by then. We start today with Buffalo Sabres forward Taylor Hall.

Taylor Hall's decision to sign a one-year contract with the Sabres in free agency was the biggest shock of the NHL offseason.

Here is a star player that had spent almost all of his career playing on bad teams, in his first trip to the open market, reportedly turning down long-term deals to sign with a franchise that had not made the playoffs in nearly a decade and had to play in a loaded division full of potential Stanley Cup contenders.

It was a big gamble all around. The Sabres were gambling that Hall, along with Eric Staal, could help improve their forward depth enough to get back in the playoffs. Hall was presumably gambling that a year next to Jack Eichel could help him boost his value for another run at free agency in a better spending environment. Sometimes when you gamble, you lose. In this case, everybody ended up losing.

The Sabres have the NHL's worst record and are headed for a 10th consecutive non-playoff season and what will almost certainly be another lengthy rebuild, while Hall is having the worst offseason season of his career which is no doubt impacting his next contract.

When asked about his future plans Hall has repeatedly said he has not ruled out anything, including a return to Buffalo. But let's be honest here: How does that make sense for anyone? If you are Hall, you are going to turn 30 years in November. You have made the playoffs twice in 11 NHL seasons. Buffalo is not any closer to the playoffs than it was six years ago when its most recent rebuild began. Why sign on for that?

On the other side, if you are Buffalo knowing how many holes you have to fill throughout the roster, why do you want to invest heavily in a 30-year-old winger that has already played his best hockey for somebody else? You already have one massive long-term investment that does not seem to be panning out (Jeff Skinner, and to a lesser extent Kyle Okposo).

Working out a trade here seems to be in the best interest of everybody. The Sabres get future assets, Hall waives his no-trade clause and goes to a contender where maybe his shooting percentage rebounds and he boosts his value, and a contender gets somebody that can help in the short-term. Win, win, win.

What the return might look like

We really do not need to speculate here because we already saw a year ago what pending free agent Hall can bring in a trade. That return is a couple of mid-to-low level prospects, a first-round pick, and a conditional pick. Given that Hall is a year older, has slightly lower numbers, and the trading team will have him for even fewer games it would be hard to imagine the return looking dramatically different this season.

The most logical landing spots: Bruins, Islanders, Maple Leafs

The Bruins have had absolutely no scoring depth beyond their top line, they have the salary cap space to make a bold move, and they have been rumored to be interested in Hall in the past. All of the pieces added up.

New York already needed more scoring depth anyway, and there is an even bigger need for it now that team captain Anders Lee is done for the season.

The Maple Leafs have a great opportunity to actually do something in the playoffs this season without having to encounter Boston or Tampa in the first two rounds like they would in a normal year. They should be favorites in any North Division matchup and they should be all-in on trying to win it all this season. Adding Hall would be an all-in move. Like the Islanders, they would probably need to get creative with the salary cap.

Wild Card team: Avalanche

This is the team I had as a favorite for Hall in the offseason, and even though they do not need him I could see them making a run at it just to add a little more juice to the lineup.

Florida and maybe even Carolina are two other.

Spot I want to see just for fun: Oilers

If the Oilers had been run competently a few years ago we would have seen the Connor McDavid to Hall connection on a regular basis. Ken Holland should correct Peter Chiarelli's mistake!

NHL Trade Deadline prediction

The Bruins get their scoring help for a mid-level prospect a first-round draft pick.

## **Interim coaching staff focused on pace, connectivity**

By Jourdon LaBarber

Sabres.com

March 21, 2021

Don Granato had little time to implement changes prior to his first game as interim head coach of the Buffalo Sabres on Thursday. The team had its morning skate cancelled due to COVID-19 protocols, forcing Granato to run his first meeting just two hours prior to puck drop.

The Sabres' game against the New York Rangers on Monday will offer the first true glance at tweaks made under the interim coaching staff, which includes assistants Dan Girardi and Matt Ellis.

Tage Thompson, who played under Granato previously with the U.S. National Team Development Program, said pace will be a focus moving forward.

"I think just keeping a lot of movement out there, making sure we're playing with a fast pace, keeping our speed up," Thompson said. "And he stresses offense quite a bit. I think that's something we've been struggling with. We've got to find ways to score. Hopefully that's something we can add to our game."

Granato sought to up the pace during practices on Friday and Sunday, both up-tempo sessions that ended with competitive battle drills. Carrying that speed into games will be an area of focus, though it will require a level of connectivity that has been absent of late.

Girardi - who joined the organization as a development coach earlier this season - said he noted disjointedness while watching games of late. The goal beginning Monday is to restore of a level of predictability among the five players on the ice.

"We're really going to focus on the team aspect of the game," Girardi said. "Being fast, taking angles, being hard to play against. Eliminate the time and space that teams have been getting against us, being able to make plays. We're just going to really focus on that."

"From that we can really, after tomorrow's game, really assess, how are the individuals playing within the system we have? What changes can we make?"

The task will be finding a way for players to maintain an aggressive, offensive mindset within a predictable, connected framework.

"We want our entire team to be offensive when there's offensive opportunity," Granato said.

Here are more notes from Sunday's skate at KeyBank Center.

Ullmark to join team for road trip

Granato said he expects goaltender Linus Ullmark to join the team for its four-game road trip, which opens Monday against the Rangers.

Ullmark has missed 12 games since sustaining a lower-body injury on Feb. 25 and has yet to practice with the team.

"We're planning on him joining us on the trip, which is great news," Granato said. "We need to integrate him in the practice at some point. That's the next step here. At that point, we can evaluate when a potential return is. So, that's all good news with Linus."

The Sabres practiced with three goaltenders on Sunday: Carter Hutton, Dustin Tokarski, and Michael Houser. Houser was signed to a one-year deal on Friday and loaned to the taxi squad Sunday morning.

The lineup

Dylan Cozens participated in a second straight practice, keeping him on track to return to the lineup against the Rangers on Monday. Cozens has missed the past three games with an upper-body injury.



Here is how the Sabres lined up:

#### Forwards

4 Taylor Hall - 24 Dylan Cozens - 23 Sam Reinhart  
68 Victor Olofsson - 12 Eric Staal / 20 Cody Eakin - 72 Tage Thompson  
53 Jeff Skinner - 27 Curtis Lazar - 37 Casey Mittelstadt  
74 Rasmus Asplund - 15 Riley Sheahan - 21 Kyle Okposo

Also practicing: 13 Tobias Rieder, 17 Steven Fogarty, 49 C.J. Smith

#### Defensemen

78 Jacob Bryson - 55 Rasmus Ristolainen  
26 Rasmus Dahlin - 33 Colin Miller  
10 Henri Jokiharju - 62 Brandon Montour  
44 Matt Irwin - 88 Brandon Davidson

#### Goalies

40 Carter Hutton  
31 Dustin Tokarski  
30 Michael Houser

## **Sabres assign Fogarty, Houser to taxi squad**

By Jourdon LaBarber

Sabres.com

March 21, 2021

The Buffalo Sabres have reassigned forward Steven Fogarty from the Rochester Americans to the taxi squad, the team announced Sunday. Goaltender Michael Houser has also been loaned to the taxi squad.

Fogarty has appeared in one game with the Sabres this season. He has eight points (5+3) in 10 games with the Amerks.

Buffalo signed Houser to a one-year contract on Friday. The 28-year-old has spent the last three seasons on an AHL deal with Rochester, playing primarily with the organization's ECHL affiliate in Cincinnati.

The Sabres open a four-game road trip against the New York Rangers on Monday.

## **Sabres acquire 6th-round pick in trade with Avalanche**

By Chris Ryndak

Sabres.com

March 20, 2021

The Buffalo Sabres have acquired a sixth-round pick in the 2021 NHL Draft from the Colorado Avalanche in exchange for goaltender Jonas Johansson.

Johansson, 25, is 0-5-1 this season with an .884 save percentage and a 3.79 goals-against average. He's made a career-high six starts this year, splitting time with Carter Hutton as Linus Ullmark recovers from a lower-body injury sustained on February 25.

"I'd like to thank Jonas for his contributions to the Sabres organization over the last seven years," Sabres general manager Kevyn Adams said. "He has worked hard to develop into the professional he is and I wish him all the best in the future."

The Sabres signed goaltender Michael Houser to a one-year contract on Friday.

Buffalo's next scheduled game is Monday night on the road against the New York Rangers. Today's game against the Boston Bruins was postponed as a result of five Bruins players entering the NHL's COVID Protocols.

## 'It is challenging' | Sabres react to Saturday's postponement

By Jourdon LaBarber

Sabres.com

March 19, 2021

Don Granato got his first chance to run a practice with the Buffalo Sabres on Friday, an up-tempo session that made good on the interim head coach's promise to seek more pace moving forward.

The season tossed its latest curveball at the Sabres just as the skate had wrapped up. The NHL announced that the Boston Bruins' next two games - including a meeting with the Sabres at KeyBank Center on Saturday - had been postponed after four additional Bruins players entered COVID protocols.

The Sabres played the Bruins on Thursday night, Granato's first game as interim coach. Bruins forward Sean Kuraly entered the NHL's COVID protocols prior to the game.

The Sabres previously experienced a 15-day pause in February after hosting the Devils on Jan. 31. The Devils had six players marked as COVID-related absences entering that game. The Sabres had nine players enter COVID protocol over the ensuing week, eight of whom tested positive.

Granato admitted the experience in February was on his mind after receiving word of the Bruins' positive tests.

"We don't have a lot of information yet, so that still goes through your mind," Granato said. "It puts you in a wait-and-see and nobody likes that. It is challenging."

Dylan Cozens was one of the eight players who tested positive during the February outbreak, though he was mostly asymptomatic. He echoed Granato in expressing concern among Sabres players.

"From what I think, I don't see how it's really much of a different situation that what happened with New Jersey," Cozens said. "So, there is definitely some nerves in the room. Like, we don't want to get shut down again. That was not fun to have to quarantine and go through. I mean, we're just hoping that it didn't transmit to any of us. But we're just kind of taking it day by day right now."

The cancellation on Saturday is the latest twist in a season that was never going to be easy. Strict protocols limit interaction off the ice and confine players to their hotel rooms and outdoor walks on the road. Some players, like veteran forward Eric Staal, traveled to Buffalo without their families.

The Sabres had played to a .500 points percentage prior to its two-week hiatus at 4-4-2. They are 2-15-2 since returning from the two-week break and have since lost captain Jack Eichel, defenseman Jake McCabe, and starting goaltender Linus Ullmark to injuries.

"This whole season, this year in itself, has been so weird and different and unique," Staal said following the game on Thursday. "There's so many things behind the scenes that everybody's dealing with on a day-to-day basis."

Granato said a decision regarding a potential practice on Saturday had not yet been made as of Friday afternoon. Buffalo's next scheduled game is against the New York Rangers at Madison Square Garden on Monday night.

### Friday's practice

Cozens practiced for the first time since sustaining an upper-body injury upon being checked into the boards by Pittsburgh Penguins forward Zach Aston-Reese on March 12.

"I felt really good out there in practice today," Cozens said. "I'm excited to be back with the team and I'm feeling one-hundred percent today."

Here's how the Sabres lined up:

4 Taylor Hall - 24 Dylan Cozens - 23 Sam Reinhart  
68 Victor Olofsson - 12 Eric Staal / 20 Cody Eakin - 72 Tage Thompson  
53 Jeff Skinner - 27 Curtis Lazar - 37 Casey Mittelstadt  
74 Rasmus Asplund - 15 Riley Sheahan - 21 Kyle Okposo

78 Jacob Bryson - 55 Rasmus Ristolainen  
10 Henri Jokiharju - 62 Brandon Montour  
26 Rasmus Dahlin - 33 Colin Miller  
44 Matt Irwin - 88 Brandon Davidson

40 Carter Hutton  
31 Dustin Tokarski

## **Sabres game against Bruins on March 20 postponed**

By Chris Ryndak

Sabres.com

March 19, 2021

The Buffalo Sabres' game against the Boston Bruins on Saturday, March 20 has been postponed, the National Hockey League announced.

As a result of four additional Boston Bruins players entering the NHL's COVID Protocols earlier today, Boston's games tomorrow against the Sabres and Tuesday versus the New York Islanders will be postponed.

The Sabres played the Bruins last night at KeyBank Center. Before the game, Bruins forward Sean Kuraly entered the NHL's COVID Protocols.

Pending test results in the coming days, it is expected that the Bruins will be able to re-open their facilities for practice on Wednesday. The decision was made by the League's, NHLPA's and Club's medical groups.

The League announced that the Bruins' organization has, and will continue to follow, all recommended guidelines aimed at protecting the health and safety of its players, staff and community at large as set by the NHL, local, state and national agencies.

For the latest Sabres news, stay tuned to Sabres.com, the team's official social media channels and the new Sabres app.

## **Sabres sign Houser to one-year deal**

By Chris Ryndak

Sabres.com

March 19, 2021

The Buffalo Sabres have signed goaltender Michael Houser to a one-year contract worth \$700,000.

Houser, 28, joined the organization in 2018-19 when he signed an AHL deal with the Rochester Americans. He has primarily manned the net for the Sabres' ECHL affiliate, the Cincinnati Cyclones. Cincinnati opted out of the 2020-21 season so Houser has been on the Amerks' roster this year.

With the Cyclones, he was named the 2018-19 ECHL Goaltender of the Year and an All-ECHL First Team selection after leading all netminders with a record of 29-7-4-1.

Last season in Cincinnati, he posted a 16-5-5 record in 26 games, ranked fifth in the ECHL among qualified goaltenders with a 2.27 goals-against average and tied for 14th in wins. He helped backstop Cincinnati to the second-lowest goals against number in the ECHL's Western Conference in 2019-20.

He was named the OHL's Most Outstanding Player in 2011-12 and won an OHL Championship with the London Knights that season.

Due to league COVID-19 protocols affecting the Utica Comets, the Amerks' game scheduled for tonight against Utica has been postponed. The two clubs are set to meet again on Wednesday.