



# **Buffalo Sabres**

## **Daily Press Clips**

*March 24, 2021*

## **Sabres' goalie depth thinned with Hutton sent home for tests**

By John Wawrow

Associated Press

March 23, 2021

Sabres goalie Carter Hutton has been sent home for further testing on a lower-body injury, leaving the slumping team with no experienced presence in net during a season that's gone from bad to worse for Buffalo.

Interim coach Don Granato on Tuesday said Dustin Tokarski will make his first NHL start in more than five years Wednesday, when Buffalo opens a two-game series at the Pittsburgh Penguins. Minor-league journeyman Michael Houser, who was only signed on Friday, will serve as the backup.

And as if the last-place Sabres haven't endured enough bad news, Granato said the team — already minus captain Jack Eichel, out indefinitely with an upper-body injury — could be missing two more forwards.

Granato said Tobias Rieder could miss a second consecutive game with an undisclosed injury, and Kyle Okposo isn't expected to be available until after Buffalo completes its four-game road trip at Boston on Sunday. Okposo has already missed one game and didn't travel with the team because of an upper body injury.

Buffalo is 0-12-2 in its past 14 to match the longest streak in franchise history set midway through the 2014-15 season, when the Sabres went 0-14. The 14-game skids represent the longest in the NHL since the Phoenix Coyotes went 0-8-4 with three ties from Feb. 21 to March 21, 2004.

Hutton's absence is the most concerning after he was hurt in the opening minutes of a 5-3 loss at the New York Rangers on Monday night. Hutton made two saves before he was injured when New York's Julien Gauthier slid hard into him while being pushed by Sabres defenseman Rasmus Ristolainen. Hutton needed assistance walking once he left the ice.

Buffalo is already minus starting goalie Linus Ullmark, who missed his 13th game since sustaining a lower body injury. Ullmark practiced with the team Tuesday for the first time since being injured, but there is no clear timetable for his return.

"Certainly, we want him back as soon as we can, and I think Linus wants to be back as soon as we can, but the information's not there yet to know the date on that," Granato said.

Ullmark said he felt all right, and added he'll have a better idea regarding his return after another practice.

Tokarski finished the game at New York making 33 saves in his first NHL appearance since Oct. 28, 2016, when he was with Anaheim. His last start came on Dec. 21, 2015, when he was with Montreal.

The 28-year-old Houser has yet to play at the NHL level since turning pro in 2012-13.

The Sabres' lack of goaltending depth was further depleted Saturday when Buffalo acquired a sixth-round 2021 draft pick in trading Jonas Johansson to Colorado.

With Ullmark not available, Buffalo is expected to bring up a goalie from the minors to fill Houser's spot on the taxi squad. NHL rules require teams to have three goalies available this season.

The Sabres, at 6-20-4, sit last in the overall league standings and are in jeopardy of extending their playoff drought to an NHL record-matching 10th season. Granato took over last week after coach Ralph Krueger was fired. Buffalo's season was also paused for two weeks in early February after nine players and Krueger were placed in the NHL's COVID-19 protocol.

## **Buffalo plays Pittsburgh, looks to stop road skid**

Associated Press

March 23, 2021

Buffalo Sabres (6-20-4, eighth in the East Division) vs. Pittsburgh Penguins (19-11-2, third in the East Division)

Pittsburgh; Wednesday, 8 p.m. EDT

**BOTTOM LINE:** Buffalo travels to Pittsburgh looking to stop its seven-game road slide.

The Penguins have gone 19-11-2 against division opponents. Pittsburgh has allowed 23 power-play goals, stopping 75.8% of opponent opportunities.

The Sabres are 6-20-4 against opponents in the East Division. Buffalo averages 2.7 penalties per game, the least in the NHL. Brandon Davidson leads the team averaging 0.3.

In their last meeting on March 13, Pittsburgh won 3-0.

**TOP PERFORMERS:** Kasper Kapanen leads the Penguins with a plus-12 in 29 games this season. Sidney Crosby has eight assists over the last 10 games for Pittsburgh.

Sam Reinhart has 20 total points while scoring 11 goals and totaling nine assists for the Sabres. Brandon Montour has one goal and four assists over the last 10 games for Buffalo.

**LAST 10 GAMES:** Penguins: 7-2-1, averaging 3.2 goals, 5.4 assists, 3.2 penalties and 7.8 penalty minutes while giving up 1.7 goals per game with a .943 save percentage.

Sabres: 0-9-1, averaging 1.8 goals, 3.2 assists, 3.1 penalties and 7.3 penalty minutes while giving up four goals per game with an .878 save percentage.

**INJURIES:** Penguins: Teddy Blueger: out (upper body), Brandon Tanev: out (upper body).

Sabres: Kyle Okposo: day to day (undisclosed), Carter Hutton: day to day (undisclosed), Jake McCabe: out (knee), Will Borgen: out (forearm), Jack Eichel: out (upper body), Linus Ullmark: out (lower body).

## **As trade deadline approaches, Sabres' Eric Staal focusing on 'what I can control'**

By Lance Lysowski

The Buffalo News

March 23, 2021

PITTSBURGH – Whenever the pace slows, or there isn't enough energy, Eric Staal sends a jolt throughout the Buffalo Sabres' practices with a roar to celebrate a goal or a playful remark to keep the mood light.

The 36-year-old former Stanley Cup champion is trying to make the best of an increasingly challenging situation. His wife, Tanya, and their three children are back in Minnesota while Staal plays out the final year of his contract amid the Covid-19 pandemic.

When Staal was acquired by his former teammate, Sabres General Manager Kevyn Adams, in September, the accomplished center embraced the move and envisioned teaming with captain Jack Eichel to lead the franchise back to contender status.

The plan has gone terribly awry. Eichel endured a series of injuries that impacted his performance and remains out of the lineup, former coach Ralph Krueger was fired with the Sabres sitting last in the National Hockey League and Buffalo carries a 14-game winless streak – one loss away from the franchise record – into a Wednesday night matchup against the Pittsburgh Penguins at PPG Paints Arena.

"It hasn't been good enough," Staal lamented Thursday. "I haven't been good enough."

Staal has gone 21 games without a goal – his longest drought since he went 33 games as a rookie in 2003-04 – and is playing a lesser role than the one to which he's accustomed. It is a foregone conclusion that he will be among the Sabres traded by Adams before the April 12 deadline.

Sources told The Buffalo News that Adams has yet to approach Staal about his modified no-trade clause, which includes a list of 10 teams to which he cannot be traded.

"I think it's focusing on what I can control," Staal said after practice Tuesday. "Right now, it's trying to do the right things every shift when I'm called upon. Obviously, the role I've been in here for the last little while has been a little bit different, and I need to find ways to play the game the right way consistently over and over and doing the right things, not cheating the game for plays. As difficult as it's been offensively, I still have to make sure I'm playing the right way and doing the right things.

"Certainly, a challenge, especially when as a group we're struggling. Now, it's my job to compete and do what I can in spots that I'm given. I'll continue to try and do that (Wednesday)."

Despite Eichel's seven-game absence, the Sabres have not given Staal more responsibility. He's averaging a career-low 15:23 of ice time while producing his lowest faceoff win percentage (46.7) since 2009-10. With Buffalo's power play amid a 0-for-21 slump, interim coach Don Granato opted not to elevate Staal to the top unit.

Staal's goals above replacement, a metric by Evolving-Hockey.com that assigns a total value to a player based on his contributions in various situations, is the second-worst mark on the Sabres behind Rasmus Dahlin.

Across 29 games, Staal has three goals with seven assists for 10 points and a minus-18 rating. He has yet to play 20 minutes in a game and has not benefited from having stable linemates. Yet, some of Staal's underlying numbers are promising, particularly since the Sabres returned from the two-week Covid-19 pause on Feb. 15.

During that span, Staal ranks first among Buffalo forwards in on-ice shot quality at 5-on-5 and on-ice shot differential in those situations.

Staal's 21-game goal drought has included five assists and a minus-16 rating, and he's averaged 15:25 of ice time. For context, Staal has averaged 19:25 of ice time while totaling 12 seasons of 20 or more goals during his 17-year NHL career.

Staal ranks seventh among the Sabres this season in individual shot quality at 5-on-5, according to NaturalStatTrick.com. He has proven at times this season to be an effective power forward who is hard on the

forecheck and never afraid to drive to the net. The Sabres, though, have too many players who remain on the perimeter in the offensive zone. It's a team without an identity, and it's unclear where Staal fits in how Granato wants the Sabres to play.

Staal, though, has been an invaluable resource to the Sabres. He's a playoff-hardened veteran who has appeared in 1,270 regular-season games, totaling 439 goals with 592 assists for 1,031 points.

"Amazing, amazing guy, incredible career, certainly, but I'm glad he's here," Granato said. "Certainly, when you have challenging times as a coach, you need to lean on players and feel good that messages are conveyed, a standard is being pushed. You guys know he's authentic. That's what I love about him, he's a competitive guy, he's a worker, he's won Stanley Cups, he's been in the bottom of the league at times. But the authenticity of him and the strength of character within him is really inspiring, certainly for people in our positions within an organization."

Those qualities, and Staal's on-ice traits, will make him coveted by playoff contenders. He's a former team captain with a Stanley Cup ring, 62 games of playoff experience and an unwavering desire to win. The Penguins are among a group of teams with a need at center.

Staal scored 42 goals in 2017-18 and can provide value in the top or bottom six. Perhaps what is most important, given his track record: he'll only be owed a prorated amount of his \$3 million salary and could likely be had for a draft pick.

"I love playing with him," Sabres winger Victor Olofsson said. "He's a really smart player and his experience, he's done it all, right? He's been through it all. So that definitely helps a lot. It helps trying to keep everyone calm."

Even amid all the losing, Staal has declined to speak about his future, or lack thereof, in Buffalo. His focus remains on improving his own game and helping the Sabres snap this historic skid.

While Staal's family remains in Minnesota, he'll likely soon learn where he'll finish the season. Wherever Staal lands, he'll continue his quest to accomplish what he and his teammates could not this season in Buffalo.

"Clearly, in my mind, I had envisioned things differently coming here, and it just hasn't come to fruition and it hasn't lived up to those thoughts," Staal said. "I think that's for sure been challenging, that's been difficult, but that's still no excuse. It doesn't matter. I have more pride in myself, what I can do in this league, what I can do on the ice."

## **Sabres' Linus Ullmark returns to practice; Dustin Tokarski to start Wednesday**

By Lance Lysowski

The Buffalo News

March 23, 2021

PITTSBURGH – As the Buffalo Sabres await word on Carter Hutton's status, good news finally arrived for interim coach Don Granato with goalie Linus Ullmark successfully completing a practice Tuesday afternoon in PPG Paints Arena.

Ullmark, 27, faced shots from teammates for the first time since he suffered a lower-body injury during the first period of a 4-3 overtime loss to the New Jersey Devils on Feb. 25. However, Ullmark will miss a 14th consecutive game Wednesday when the Sabres face the Penguins in PPG Paints Arena, as he still has benchmarks to complete before returning to Buffalo's lineup.

Sabres interim coach Don Granato expressed hope to the media Tuesday that Ullmark will be ready for the second game of the back-to-back Thursday night.

"That would be great if he could, and will, with goalie coach Mike Bales and the training staff, push him as hard as they feel that is good and is a healthy push," said Granato. "And then we'll get that information, obviously, upon return. So, you can't rule anything out, I would say. The next couple days we'll be looking at the potential of that. Certainly, we want him back as soon as we can, and I think Linus wants to be back as soon as we can, but the information's not there yet to know the date on that."

Dustin Tokarski, a 31-year-old who spent last season with the Penguins' American Hockey League affiliate, will start Wednesday and Michael Houser will backup, said Granato. Tokarski 33 of 37 shots in relief Monday, taking a 4-3 loss to the Rangers in his first NHL action since Oct. 28, 2016. Houser is a 28-year-old who has never appeared in an NHL game.

Hutton flew back to Buffalo for further medical evaluation after a lower-body injury forced him to exit the game in the first period Monday night. The 35-year-old pending unrestricted free agent is 1-10-1 with an .886 save percentage in 13 games this season.

Ukko-Pekka Luukkonen, the Sabres' top goaltending prospect, was assigned from Rochester to the taxi squad. Luukkonen, 22, has not played a game since March 10 because of the Amerks' two-week Covid-19 pause. He's also barely skated since exiting quarantine.

The Sabres (6-20-4), whose 16 points are the fewest in the NHL, carry a 14-game winless streak into their second stop on the three-city road trip. The Penguins (19-11-2) are without center Evgeni Malkin, but they rank 11th in the league in 5-on-5 goals scored and still have an exceptional top six, led by Sidney Crosby.

It's the sort of matchup fit for Ullmark, who has emerged as the Sabres' unquestioned starter in net the past two seasons. The former sixth-round draft choice is 22-18-5 with a .916 save percentage in 46 games during that span, including 5-4-2 with a .919 save percentage in 2020-21.

The injury occurred when Ullmark made a series of saves to fend off the New Jersey Devils, capped by a glove-handed stop in which he did a split and needed to be examined by a team trainer. Ullmark finished the first period and was replaced by Hutton.

"It's frustrating obviously to be on the sidelines and watching the boys struggling, but I just gotta control what I can control," said Ullmark. "We had a good plan right from the get-go and I feel like we've taken the necessary steps to always improve. ... For now, there's no set timetable for me; it's more of a day-to-day basis. We have to check off a couple of those checkmarks along the way."

The Sabres' top three goalies at the start of this season won't be available to Granato on Wednesday: Hutton, Ullmark and Jonas Johansson, who was traded to Colorado in exchange for a sixth-round draft choice. Another loss would make the Sabres' winless streak the longest in the NHL since the Phoenix Coyotes dropped 15 games in a row from Feb. 21 to March 21, 2004.

Though goaltending depth is an issue, Ullmark's presence at practice Tuesday was one of the few encouraging moments for the Sabres amid all the losing.

"You don't get anywhere in this league without great goaltending," said center Eric Staal. "From what I've seen of Linus ... he's a great goalie. Obviously, we missed him a lot. Missed him dearly. He was real solid for us, gave us a chance every time he was in the net and instills a lot of confidence in our team. When you're missing that it's difficult."

#### Other injury updates

Neither defenseman Colin Miller nor winger Tobias Rieder were able to practice Tuesday as both carry day-to-day injury designations, according to Granato. The Sabres are hopeful Miller can be in the lineup Wednesday after he suffered what appeared to be a shoulder injury Monday in Madison Square Garden.

Rieder, though, is more of a "question mark," according to Granato, and the Sabres will know more about each player's status when the team skates Wednesday morning in PPG Paints Arena. Winger Kyle Okposo remains out with an upper-body injury and there is not a timeline for his return.

#### Schedule change

The Rochester Americans will have to wait at least two more days to resume play following a two-week Covid-19 pause. The Amerks' game scheduled for Wednesday night at Utica was postponed because league Covid-19 protocols continue to affect the Comets.

The Amerks' past five games have been postponed and three of their players tested positive for Covid-19. Their last game was March 10 at Utica and they are scheduled to play at Syracuse on Friday. The Amerks (6-3-1) practiced Tuesday in Rochester's Blue Cross Arena.

## **Sabres through 30 games: As you would figure, this season is one of the worst**

By Mike Harrington

The Buffalo News

March 23, 2021

The Buffalo Sabres' winless streak has reached historic proportions, as the club equaled its franchise record by hitting 14 games with Monday's 5-3 loss to the New York Rangers in Madison Square Garden.

Buffalo is 0-12-2 during this stretch and its 6-20-4 record through 30 games is by far the worst in the NHL. The Sabres are eight points behind Detroit and Anaheim, while the Ducks (9-18-6) join Buffalo as the only teams with fewer than 10 wins.

Want a gruesome comparison? There are nine teams in the league with 20+ wins so far and three others are at 19.

Here's a list of the worst records through 30 games in Sabres history. The 2013-14 season, remember, was former GM Tim Murray's first tank team, built to lose in order to secure a high draft pick. Buffalo got the No. 2 pick and selected Sam Reinhart.

Season	Record	Pts	(Win 7)
2013-14	6-22-2	14	(Game 31)
2020-21	6-20-4	16	(TBA)
1986-87	6-20-4	16	(Game 32)
1970-71	6-19-5	17	(Game 34)
1971-72	6-18-6	18	(Game 34)

"We don't want to dwell. You mentioned a streak. We can't think of a streak," interim coach Don Granato said when asked after Monday's game. "We can't think of a streak when we're on a winning streak. You don't. It's a competitive industry. You have to be a competitor. And you have to know how to plow through and let negatives go."

The Buffalo Sabres tied the franchise record for their longest winless streak Monday night as Chris Kreider's second power-play goal of the game snapped a third-period tie and sent the New York Rangers to a 5-3 win.

What's next for the Sabres? If they lose their nationally televised game Wednesday night at Pittsburgh to push their streak to 15 games, it will be the longest in the league since the Phoenix Coyotes had a 15-gamer from Feb. 21-March 21, 2004.

If the Sabres go 0 for their road trip by losing Wednesday and Thursday in Pittsburgh and Saturday in Boston, they would return home with a 17-game streak. Since 2000, the only one longer was Pittsburgh's 18-gamer in the 2003-04 season.

After that, you would think the Sabres have a decent chance to get a win or two. They play four straight home games against Philadelphia and the Rangers, starting with the Flyers here on Monday, and then a home-and-home against New Jersey.

The Sabres have three of their six wins this season against Lindy Ruff's Devils, and New Jersey is the only team Buffalo has beaten since Jan. 26. Against everybody else in that stretch, the Sabres are 0-15-2.

"I don't think you can focus on that as a player as a guy in the room or as a team. It's about trying to get the next win," winger Jeff Skinner said after Monday's game. "Obviously, we realize we're in a tough spot. We're in a tough division and there's no easy nights. All you have to do is control what you can control and that's to come to the rink when it's a practice or game and do your best to improve and give your best effort."

If you're looking way ahead, there have been 10 winless streaks of 20 games or more in NHL history. The last ones were in 1992-93, a 21-gamer by expansion Ottawa and a 20-gamer by second-year San Jose. The all-time record is 30 games, set by Winnipeg in 1980-81.

## **Linus Ullmark returns to practice for Sabres**

By Brayton J. Wilson

WGR 550

March 23, 2021

The Buffalo Sabres got some great news on Tuesday as goaltender Linus Ullmark was back on the ice for practice at PPG Paints Arena in Pittsburgh.

Ullmark has been out of service for the Sabres since Feb. 27 after leaving the Feb. 25 matchup with the New Jersey Devils at KeyBank Center with a lower-body injury.

At that point of the season, Ullmark had been playing pretty well for Buffalo with a 5-4-2 record in 12 games played with a 2.44 goals-against average and a .919 save percentage. Leading up to the injury, former head coach Ralph Krueger had turned to Ullmark for five straight starts, going 2-2-0 with a 2.11 goals-against average and a .930 save percentage.

The 27-year-old netminder was happy to be back on the ice with his teammates after nearly a full month away due to his injury.

I felt alright. It was the first real session back, so it was exciting. It was fun to be around the boys once again," Ullmark said following Tuesday's practice.

"It's frustrating, obviously, to be on the sidelines and watching the boys struggle, but I've just got to control what I can control."

As for the play that Ullmark suffered the injury, it was an incredible series where the goalie was moving all around the crease making save-after-save on Devils shooters. After he made the final glove save to draw a whistle, he took some time to get up from his feet.

"It was on the chaotic play where there was a lot of shots coming from back-and-forth, and for some reason, I made the save at the end and afterwards I just felt the discomfort, at first. Then it kind of just grew into something more and more intense," Ullmark explained. "So I can't really tell you what exactly happened and when, but I think it was around that time."

Sabres interim head coach Don Granato said Tuesday that Ullmark participated in the full 20 minutes of drills at practice, but said it will take him a few days before the team makes any official decision on his return to the net.

Ullmark attributes his return to the ice on Tuesday to the plan that was set for him shortly after his injury.

"feel like we've taken the necessary steps to always improve," Ullmark said. "Obviously sometimes it takes longer to get back on [the ice], but for now, there's no set timetable for me. It's more of a day-to-day basis. We have to check off a couple of those check marks along the way. Sometimes you can check off a couple of them, and then the next day you might go back and erase that, and then come back strong the following day."

The Sabres are staring at three more games on this road trip, with two games coming back-to-back on Wednesday and Thursday against the Pittsburgh Penguins, while the team will head to Boston to face the Bruins on Saturday.

With the upcoming slate of games for the Sabres, Granato was asked if there is a realistic chance that he could be on this road trip, perhaps as soon as the two-game set with the Penguins.

"That would be great, if he could," Granato said. "We will, with goalie coach Mike Bales and the training staff, push him as hard as they feel is good and is a healthy push, and then we'll get that information upon return. You can't rule anything out, I would say, but the next couple of days we'll be looking at the potential of that. Certainly we want him back as soon as we can, and I think Linus wants to be back as soon as he can, but the information is not there yet to know the date on that."

Without Ullmark in net, the Sabres have went on to lose 14-consecutive games, starting with the contest he was forced to leave early in on Feb. 25. Buffalo has gone 0-12-2 in the winless streak, which has led to Krueger getting fired and the 2020-21 season spiraling out of control.

Ullmark has been part of the organization dating back to the 2015-16 season when he made the jump to North America from Sweden. Since then, he's made appearances in 109 games for the Sabres, going 46-45-12 with a career goals-against average of 2.77, a career save percentage of .912 and three shutouts.

The one consistent that has been with the team in Ullmark's years in North America is losing. While he's been able to experience some winning years with the Rochester Americans in the American Hockey League, the past three seasons as a full-time member of the Sabres have been a struggle, whether it was expected or not.

"For some reason, these last couple of years hasn't really been going the way we wanted to," Ullmark said. "Obviously, we've gotten off to a very good start, and then we haven't been able to maintain it. I thought we were in kind of good shape before my injury. I thought we played a solid game. Then it's just a matter of self confidence. When you start racking up those losses and you're playing teams that have figured out; I thought we played really well against the [New York] Islanders, but the Islanders had perfect games, and it's hard to beat the Islanders when they're on their perfect game.

"It's a very competitive league, and it's a very competitive division. As soon as we can get back on the winning side of it, I think it it's going to be even better. We've just got to find a way. There's no real answer to how it feels and what the issue is or anything. If we had the answer, obviously we would've stopped losses a long while ago. So [we must] just get up the next morning and play a game that we love and try to enjoy it as much as possible. In the end, we'll get the wins."

The Sabres will hope to get back on track, with Ullmark in net or not, on Wednesday in Game 1 of their two-game set with the Penguins.

Following Tuesday's practice in Pittsburgh, Granato gave the latest updates on a few players that are dealing with injuries.

- Carter Hutton has returned to Buffalo for further evaluation of his lower-body injury suffered early in Monday night's 5-3 loss to the New York Rangers at Madison Square Garden.
- Kyle Okposo is dealing with an upper-body injury that forced him to miss the team's four-game road trip. Granato says there is no timetable yet for his recovery, but he is unlikely available for the rest of the road trip.
- Colin Miller and Tobias Rieder are both day-to-day after missing Tuesday's practice due to minor injuries. Granato believes Miller could play Wednesday, but Rieder is still a question mark at this point.

With the uncertainties of Ullmark's status for Wednesday, the Sabres have called up goalie Ukko-Pekka Luukkonen from the Rochester Americans and loaned him to the team's taxi squad. The team is likely preparing for Dustin Tokarski to get the start for Buffalo, while Michael Houser will serve as his backup.

The Sabres will hold a morning skate on Wednesday at 11:30 a.m. ET, where we should get a better update on the lineup for the evening's game.

## **Granato: We have to be ready and willing to compete**

WGR 550

March 23, 2021

It has been nearly a full week since the Buffalo Sabres have fired Ralph Krueger as their head coach.

After just 97 games behind the bench for the Sabres, Krueger led Buffalo to a meager 36-49-12 record, while getting his team off to an abysmal 6-18-4 start to the 2020-21 season. At the time of his firing, the Sabres were in the middle of a 12-game winless streak, going 0-10-2 in that stretch.

Two games later, the winless streak has reached 14, a mark that ties the franchise record for the longest winless streak set in the 2014-15 season. That team was intentionally trying to be bad, as they went on to lose 14-straight games in regulation, which included a winless month of January.

With a loss to the Pittsburgh Penguins on Wednesday night, the Sabres will set a new franchise record for a stretch of consecutive losses, regardless of them being regulation or overtime/shootout losses.

With Krueger no longer in charge in Buffalo, the head coaching duties, on an interim basis, now lie with longtime coach Don Granato.

The 53-year-old has had plenty of coaching experience over his years in the game of hockey, but this is the first time he has ever held the distinction as a head coach at the National Hockey League level. Before taking over on an interim basis this season, Granato has served as an assistant coach in the NHL for parts of five seasons with the Sabres, Chicago Blackhawks and St. Louis Blues.

It will now be up to Granato and his interim coaching staff of Matt Ellis and Dan Girardi to get the Sabres out of their current funk and try to turn the 2020-21 season back in the right direction, even if the playoffs are not legitimately in the picture.

Granato took some time on Tuesday to join the Howard and Jeremy Show on WGR, as his team was preparing for a Tuesday practice at PPG Paints Arena in Pittsburgh.

Here is some of what he had to say:

Granato on what went right for the Sabres in Monday's loss to the Rangers:

"I felt that we were able to sustain a pace through 60 minutes, which is something we haven't done. We've really dropped off. Even in the Boston game the other day, the energy level dropped, we lost puck battles, and we just didn't look good late as that game wore on. [We looked] much, much better last night."

Granato on his observations and why the team has struggled to find success:

"I felt our team was confused and anxious, at times. I've never felt the effort wasn't there, the commitment wasn't there. There's been nothing like this season. All of that said, we have had trouble scoring. ... We know the importance of defense - that can hurt your confidence if you're a team that can't defend itself and defend well. Not spoken often is offense and the damaging psychological impact of not being able to score.

"It's dreadful when you fall behind 1-0 in a game and you feel like you can't get back in a game, and that happens all the time in sports. I'd like to have [my teams] confident offensively, and that's the direction I believe we need to move, certainly without compromising improvements on the defensive side, and I don't think you have to compromise. In fact, I know you don't have to compromise on the defensive side to accomplish that."

Granato on how the team will be able to dig themselves out of this stretch:

"Confidence was a big issue, and we played with anxiety. So I addressed those two issues, and I tried to instill a calm without forgetting or overlooking the fact that we need to be competitive. The bottom line is it's a competition and competitors win. You have to be ready to compete, you have to be willing to compete. It's how bad you want to succeed. If there's an issue, how bad do you want to fix it, and how important is it to you? Your actions will speak to those, and we need to see action and it's about taking action."

Granato on how to handle a losing streak like this one:

"I've been on lots of winning streaks. I don't believe I've been on a streak like this, but I've had teams that were in the exact same spot like this. They just couldn't win consistently, they held some anxieties and confusion, whatever it may be to why they may not be getting the results that they felt. On a winning streak, you don't count your wins and you can't afford to dwell on it because the next team will run you right over. Similar to a losing streak. What we're trying to do now and make certain is we stay active, we stay aggressive."

Granato on Sabres prospect Linus Weissbach:

"Very skilled, smaller player, shifty, agile, and always a threat to make a play. He's competitive, so that makes him fun to watch, as well."

## **OPINION: What do the Sabres do with the expansion draft coming?**

By Joe DiBiase

WGR 550

March 23, 2021

The NHL Trade Deadline is under a month away on April 12, and unlike most deadlines there's an extra factor to consider when the Sabres decide which players to sell off.

Some big things still need to be figured out, like whether or not the Sabres move Taylor Hall at the trade deadline.

The looming Seattle Expansion Draft this coming offseason.

The Seattle Expansion Draft rules are the same as the rules from the Vegas Expansion Draft in 2017. Every team will have the option to protect either seven forwards, three defensemen and one goalie, or protect eight skaters and one goalie.

The Sabres must protect forward Jeff Skinner due to the no movement clause in his contract.

If you need a refresher on the expansion draft rules, CapFriendly.com has a great breakdown of the guidelines.

The Sabres may be a rare instance of the eight players and one goalie option being a more favorable course of action. There are too many defensemen and not enough forwards.

If the Sabres go with this option, this is who I'd protect:

- Forwards: Jack Eichel, Sam Reinhart, Victor Olofsson, Jeff Skinner
- Defensemen: Rasmus Dahlin, Henri Jokiharju, Jake McCabe, Rasmus Ristolainen
- Goaltender: Linus Ullmark

My protections here assume contract extensions for Reinhart, McCabe, and Ullmark. They also assume no Eichel trade, and, at long last, a Ristolainen trade.

The Sabres will likely have to say goodbye to a valuable defenseman.

That could mean letting McCabe walk in free agency, finally trading Ristolainen with a year left on his deal, or giving up on a bright young defenseman like Jokiharju or Borgen.

Ristolainen is likely the one you'd get the most value for in a trade, so he'd be my choice.

For the exercise, here's what the Sabres' protections could look like if they go seven forwards, three defenseman and one goalie:

- Forwards: Jack Eichel, Sam Reinhart, Victor Olofsson, Jeff Skinner, Casey Mittelstadt, Tage Thompson, Rasmus Asplund
- Defensemen: Rasmus Dahlin, Henri Jokiharju, Will Borgen
- Goalie: Linus Ullmark

This scenario doesn't seem ideal for general manager Kevyn Adams and the Sabres. With this option, you are automatically giving away a quality defenseman for nothing. One of Jokiharju, Borgen, Ristolainen, or McCabe.

If the Sabres do decide to give a Hall contract extension, that compounds the issue.

A Hall extension creates a guarantee that the Sabres will go 7F, 3D, and 1G. That is unless Eichel or Reinhart are no longer with the Sabres by then.

The way to avoid giving up one of the few good players in this organization away for nothing is to move one before the deadline, that isn't obvious like Eric Staal or Brandon Montour.

It has never made more sense to trade Ristolainen than right now. He's having a good season, by his standards, is the perfect type of hard-nosed playoff defenseman that many general managers fall in love with, and he only has a year left on his contract after the season.

Are the Sabres going to give Ristolainen another extension? Is there any way Ristolainen, who's shown his frustration in being here, is going to sign up for that?

It makes no sense to kiss a good young defenseman like Jokiharju or Borgen, or a valuable defensive defenseman like McCabe goodbye in the name of 82 more games of Ristolainen.

## **NHL Board of Governors approve changes to draft lottery format**

By Brayton J. Wilson

WGR 550

March 23, 2021

There will be more changes coming to the NHL Draft Lottery format starting in 2021, and then again in 2022.

According to TSN hockey insider Pierre LeBrun, the National Hockey League's Board of Governors have approved changes to the draft lottery format after a week-long vote.

The first change to the NHL Draft Lottery will come this season, as the number of teams that will be drawn for the top-two overall picks in the draft will be cut from three to two.

Then in 2022, there will be two more changes to the draft lottery format:

1.) The maximum amount of slots a team can move up by winning the draft lottery will be 10. Instead of all 16 teams being eligible to win the No. 1 overall pick, only the top-11 teams will be eligible.

2.) To limit the same teams winning the NHL Draft Lottery in multiple years (i.e., the Edmonton Oilers, New Jersey Devils and New York Rangers), no team can win the lottery more than twice in a five-year period.

For example, the Buffalo Sabres are currently the last place team in the NHL with just 16 points and a 6-20-4 record in 30 games this season. If they finish the year in last place, they can pick no worse than third overall after the lottery in 2021.

If the Sabres finish with the 12th overall selection before the NHL Draft Lottery for the 2022 NHL Draft, the highest Buffalo would be able to select by winning the first draw of the lottery would be second overall.

The NHL has made many adjustments to the NHL Draft Lottery format over the course of its history since it was introduced in 1995. The most recent change came following the 2015 NHL Draft when the top-three picks of the draft would be drawn to the 15 teams that failed to make the postseason.

This past year saw the NHL draw some controversy when they included the eight teams that played in the NHL's Return To Play plan and lost in the play-in round, which has been regarded as the playoffs. The No. 1 overall pick in the 2020 NHL Draft just happened to be one of the "placeholder" teams that played in the tournament, while the Los Angeles Kings won the second overall pick and the Ottawa Senators (with the San Jose Sharks' first round pick) won the third overall pick.

The league then conducted Phase 2 of the NHL Draft Lottery in 2020, which happened to be the Rangers getting the luck of the draw and winning the first overall pick. They used that pick to select left winger Alexis Lafrenière at No. 1 overall.

More in-depth details of the changes to the draft lottery format, including odds for each team's chances of winning the first and second overall pick, are expected to be released some time in the near future.

## **Sabres confident Victor Olofsson will overcome struggles: 'He'll get there'**

By Bill Hoppe

Olean Times Herald

March 23, 2021

Interim Sabres coach Don Granato keeps learning how badly struggling winger Victor Olofsson wants to break out of his season-long funk.

Whether it's the Swede's behavior as he prepares for practice or his attentiveness during a conversation or a meeting, Granato said he sees a player "searching for the answer, searching for the direction within himself."

"Which is great," Granato said on a Zoom call Tuesday. "And he'll get there, there's no doubt in my mind he'll get there."

He added: "He has an internal desire to become better."

Olofsson, 25, has endured a rough sophomore season, compiling eight goals, 20 points and a wretched minus-17 rating in 30 games entering tonight's contest against the Pittsburgh Penguins at PPG Paints Arena.

Like most of his teammates, he has generated little offense over the Sabres' franchise-record 14-game losing streak, scoring just one goal in that awful stretch.

"It's frustrating where we are at the moment," Olofsson said. "For me too, I feel like I have a lot more to prove. Just offensively, I haven't been good enough. I just try to focus on the next game and just trying to stay as positive as I can and work hard and focus on my experiences in the past, it's always going to turn around if you work hard enough. That's my mindset right now."

Olofsson, of course, was supposed to showcase growth this season. He scored 20 goals and 42 points in 54 outings as a rookie, utilizing his quick release to burn goaltenders from the circle, especially on the power play.

That standout campaign earned him a two-year, \$6.1 million contract.

But Olofsson hasn't dispelled the belief he's too one-dimensional. He has scored 19 of his 30 career NHL goals (63.3%) on the power play. He has recorded just two even-strength goals this season.

"The five-on-five game, I think I've kind of been struggling all year," Olofsson said. "I'm just trying to get to those dirty areas and get some dirty goals and maybe some rebounds and some tips. Just trying to get those greasy goals is what I've got to do better."

In addition to his five-on-five scoring struggles, he has become a defensive liability. His ghastly minus-17 was tied for the NHL's fifth-worst rating entering Tuesday's games.

Incredibly, the Sabres are so bad defensively that rating also ranks fifth on the team. Winger Taylor Hall (minus-18), center Eric Staal (minus-19), winger Sam Reinhart (minus-20) and defenseman Rasmus Dahlin (minus-28) have produced higher numbers.

In Monday's 5-3 road loss to the New York Rangers, Olofsson played just 11 minutes, 44 seconds, a career low for a game in which he did not leave injured.

"The decisions that are made on the bench are made within a game, a single game, and then you move on," Granato said. "So it'll be different tomorrow."

The Sabres' inability to draw and convert power plays has added to Olofsson's struggles.

On Feb. 27, having scored on 19 of their 55 opportunities (34.5%), the Sabres' power play ranked first in the NHL. They haven't scored a power-play goal in the 13 games since then. They've drawn only 21 chances over that stretch.

In six of those outings, the Sabres have had one or zero power plays.

"That makes a difference for sure," Staal said of the lack of chances. "When you're getting one, maybe two a game, it's hard to generate momentum off the power play or get those Grade A chances, but with that I think it's pretty obvious that we aren't drawing enough power plays.

"We're not playing with the puck enough on the attack or playing in the offensive zone enough to create those power-play opportunities. That's all part of it."

Granato said the power play can often "self-correct during a game" with multiple opportunities.

"The first power play, you see the players have a whole lot of anxiety and they press a little bit more throughout the league," he said. "You get that one in and you tweak things and you can just take a deep breath and settle in. We haven't enjoyed that luxury much lately."

The Sabres also haven't enjoyed captain Jack Eichel's presence much lately. Their offensive catalyst has missed nine games in the last month battling two injuries. Right now, he's out indefinitely with an upper-body injury.

Olofsson said "lately our power play hasn't been good."

"Usually I put up a lot of points on the power play and goals on the power play," he said. "That's got to be better."

## **Linus Ullmark returns to practice; Sabres have more injuries**

By Bill Hoppe  
Olean Times Herald  
March 23, 2021

Having been sidelined the last 13 games, Linus Ullmark must keep testing his lower-body injury in practice. So as badly as the Buffalo Sabres need their No. 1 goalie back, he needs more than one session before he can play again.

"For now, there's no set timetable for me; it's more of a day-to-day basis," Ullmark said on a Zoom call Tuesday after practicing for the first time since getting injured Feb. 23.

So on tonight against the Pittsburgh Penguins, interim coach Don Granato said the Sabres will likely give goalie Dustin Tokarski his first NHL start since Dec. 21, 2015. Michael Houser, who has never played in the big leagues, will back him up.

Goalie Carter Hutton, who suffered a lower-body injury early in Monday's 5-3 loss to the New York Rangers, returned to Buffalo for further evaluation, Granato said.

The Sabres also play Thursday in Pittsburgh before closing their four-game road trip Saturday afternoon against the Boston Bruins.

Granato wouldn't rule out Ullmark playing later in the road trip. The Swede went through drills for 20 minutes Tuesday inside PPG Paints Arena.

"It's going to take him a few days of that before he's in any position or we're in any position to make a decision of putting him back into the lineup," Granato said.

The Sabres have imploded without Ullmark, losing every game. Monday's loss was their 14th straight, tying the franchise record first set by the 2014-15 tank team.

They had a 6-8-2 record when Ullmark left the lineup.

"(We've) missed him dearly," Sabres center Eric Staal said. "He was real solid for us, gave us a chance every time he was in the net and instills a lot of confidence in our team."

Ullmark said he was hurt during a "chaotic play when there was a lot of drops up and down, back and forth." The injury forced him to leave after the first period.

"I made the save at the end and just afterwards I felt a little discomfort at first that just kind of grew into something more and more intense," he said.

Ullmark morphed into the Sabres' backbone early this season, compiling a 5-4-2 record with a 2.44 goals against average and a .919 save percentage in 12 games.

His replacements have consistently looked wonky. Hutton and ex-Sabres goalie Jonas Johansson, who was traded to the Colorado Avalanche on Saturday, have earned one total win this season. Hutton has registered a 3.47 goals-against average and an .886 save percentage in 13 outings.

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The Sabres on Tuesday reassigned top goalie prospect Ukko-Pekka Luukkonen from the Rochester Americans to the taxi squad.

NHL teams must carry three goalies between the active roster and taxi squad this season. Adding the Finn could just be a paper move.

Luukkonen, 22, has compiled a 5-2-1 record with a 3.19 goals-against average and a .904 save percentage in eight AHL games this season.

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Granato said winger Kyle Okposo, who missed Monday's game with a lower-body injury, will likely be sidelined the entire road trip.

"No timetable yet," Granato said of Okposo's potential return.

Granato also said defenseman Colin Miller and winger Tobias Rieder are day to day with undisclosed injuries.

"I would think Miller would be fine to play," Granato said. "That's the hope. Toby maybe is more of a question mark for tomorrow in that regard."

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Tonight's Amerks game in Utica has been postponed due to AHL COVID-19 protocols affecting the Comets, the league announced Tuesday.

The Amerks, who experienced a COVID-19 pause earlier this month, haven't played since March 10.

## **Sabres' goaltending situation dire, with Hutton leaving road trip**

By Julianne Pelusi

WGRZ

March 23, 2021

PITTSBURGH — When Carter Hutton left with an injury early into the game against the New York Rangers on Monday, Dustin Tokarski entered his first NHL game in nearly four and a half years.

More issues for Don Granato, who still has not completed an entire week as the Sabres' interim head coach since Ralph Krueger's firing on Wednesday, continue to pile up - between the firing, a postponed game due to COVID-19 concerns, a growing winless streak, now at 14 games.

He can add goalie issues to the list. Granato said on Tuesday Hutton was sent back to Buffalo for further evaluation and will miss the Sabres three remaining games on their current road trip.

The 35-year-old had to be assisted off the ice after a collision early in the first period in the Sabres's 5-3 loss to the Rangers. Tokarski stopped 33 of 37 shots after taking over in net.

Hutton was splitting time between the pipes with Jonas Johansson, who was just traded to the Colorado Avalanche for a 2021 sixth round pick on Saturday, while the Sabres waited for Linus Ullmark to return from a lower body injury. Ullmark has been out since late February, but made the four-game road trip with the team to practice.

"Linus was in practice and went through the full 20-something minutes of drills and was good," Granato said after Tuesday morning's practice in Pittsburgh. "It started that process of him getting back integrated with the team. It's going to take him a few days of that before he's in any position or we're in any position to make a decision of putting him back into the lineup."

Although Granato said Ullmark will not be available yet at least for Wednesday night's game against the Penguins, teammates were optimistic about his work in Tuesday's practice.

Veteran forward Eric Staal said, "You don't get anywhere in this league without great goaltending. From what I've seen of Linus, although it hasn't been a lot of hockey since I've been here of him, but he's a great goalie. Obviously, we missed him a lot. Missed him dearly. He was real solid for us, gave us a chance every time he was in the net and instills a lot of confidence in our team.

"When you're missing that it's difficult. It was good to see him in practice today taking shots from the guys and hopefully he keeps progressing so he can get back in there to help this group get in the win column."

Granato said Tokarski is expected to start on Wednesday in Pittsburgh, and will be backed up by Michael Houser, who the Sabres signed to a one-year contract on Friday.

## **NHL rumors: Sabres want 4 'first-round picks' for Jack Eichel**

By Kyle Cantlon

Yahoo! Sports

March 23, 2021

We don't yet know if the Sabres are going to make the perilous decision to move on from captain Jack Eichel, but now we have some idea of what kind of package it will take to pry him out of Buffalo.

TVA NHL reporter Renaud Lavoie joined Sportsnet's "Writers Bloc" on Monday, telling hosts Jeff Blair and Stephen Brunt that the decision to move or keep Eichel is one that reaches far beyond the scope of the general manager.

"They're not sure exactly what they're going to do — are they going to trade him or not — because this is not only a GM decision, the owner is going to make the final decision and Jack is really close to ownership, so that is part of the equation."

Alas, there's always a "yes" price-point for even the most coveted assets, and from what Lavoie has reportedly heard from his sources around the league, that price is either fairly significant, not very much at all, or both — depending how you slice it up.

"But what I've been told is this: If they trade him, what they really want is four pieces that are first-round picks, or players that are playing if not in the NHL or elsewhere in the NCAA that are first-round picks that are having success. ... They want young players, maybe some playing in the NHL right now, that were first-round picks but if they're not in the NHL they need to be

"It's going to be a game-breaker for them, they need to change a lot of things," Lavoie added.

With Lavoie dropping the term "first-round picks" about 600 times in this two-minute clip, I'm starting to get the impression that the Sabres really want some first-round picks — four of them, even! It's a desired return that somehow seems like way too much but also not close to enough, all at the same time.

That is the depressing situation the Sabres find themselves in right now.

With the way it's going down the tube so quickly between both parties and how public Eichel's disdain of his and his team's situation has gotten — through his own words, various media reports, and the often trustworthy "where there's smoke there's usually fire" philosophy — the Sabres are absolutely going to lose a large chunk of leverage if and when every club gets wind that Eichel officially wants out.

And with Eichel's no-movement clause set to kick in after next season, the Sabres have just over a year before they're completely strapped and Eichel has complete and utter say over where he ends up, regardless of the return.

So on one hand, with the team's leverage and position of power waning by the day, getting four first-round picks or the equivalent as the package for Eichel seems like a very good return — and it likely is, depending on exactly which players or assets they turn out to be.

But on the other hand: no. Not even first-rounders is enough for arguably a top-three player in the world when he's on. A generational, elite, all-world centerman. A second overall pick who would've went No. 1 in almost any year. A guy who ownership loves and who loves ownership back. Someone who truly wants to stay in Buffalo long-term so long as the franchise doesn't keep plummeting as it has.

There's absolutely no reason this team should be in this situation. Strongly considering the possibility of having to trade your captain for some prospects and picks that may or may not turn out to be half the player that Eichel has already proven to be — with an absurdly inexperienced general manager at the helm, no less — is not exactly shrewd asset management in any sense of the word.

Though it now may be necessary to move a franchise player in order to try and spark another rebuild after the deep crater management and ownership has driven this team into. But it's absolutely mind-boggling.

Then again, when you remember we are talking about the Pegula-led Sabres here, it really isn't.

## **Sabres reassign Luukkonen to taxi squad**

By Jourdon LaBarber

Sabres.com

March 23, 2021

The Buffalo Sabres have reassigned goaltender Ukko-Pekka Luukkonen from the Rochester Americans to the taxi squad, the team announced Tuesday.

Sabres interim coach Don Granato said after practice on Tuesday that the team plans to dress Dustin Tokarski and Michael Houser as its two goaltenders against the Pittsburgh Penguins on Wednesday. Teams are required to carry at least one goaltender on their taxi squad this season.

Read more on the situation in net, including updates on Carter Hutton and Linus Ullmark, in Tuesday's practice report.

Luukkonen, 22, was selected by the Sabres during the second round of the 2017 NHL Draft. He has a .904 save percentage in eight appearances with Rochester this season.

## **Ullmark returns to practice while Hutton undergoes further evaluations**

By Jourdon LaBarber

Sabres.com

March 23, 2021

Linus Ullmark returned to practice with the Buffalo Sabres on Tuesday, marking a step forward in the goaltender's recovery from a lower-body injury that has forced him to miss the past 12 games.

Sabres interim coach Don Granato said he expects Ullmark to need more days of practice before a decision can be made on a potential return to the lineup. The team is also without goaltender Carter Hutton, who traveled back to Buffalo for further evaluation after sustaining an injury on Monday.

Granato did not rule out the possibility of Ullmark starting at some point on the Sabres' current road trip, which continues with back-to-back games in Pittsburgh on Wednesday and Thursday and concludes in Boston on Saturday afternoon.

"You can't rule anything out, I would say," Granato said. "The next couple days we'll be looking at the potential of that. Certainly, we want him back as soon as we can, and I think Linus wants to be back as soon as we can, but the information's not there yet to know the date on that."

Granato said the current plan is for the Sabres to move forward with the two healthy goaltenders on their active roster, Dustin Tokarski and Michael Houser. Tokarski entered in relief of Hutton against the Rangers, his first NHL action since October 2016, and stopped 33 of 37 shots in 56:23.

The team signed Houser to a one-year contract last Friday, one day prior to acquiring a sixth-round pick from Colorado in exchange for goaltender Jonas Johansson. The 28-year-old spent the beginning of the season in Rochester but did not appear in a game.

Houser has spent the past two seasons with Buffalo's ECHL affiliate, the Cincinnati Cyclones, for whom he posted a .922 save percentage in 41 contests in 2019-20. He has never appeared in an NHL game.

Ullmark went 5-4-2 with a .919 save percentage in 12 starts prior to sustaining his injury against the New Jersey Devils on Feb. 25. He echoed Granato in saying that his readiness will be a day-to-day evaluation as he continues to skate with the team.

"I felt all right," Ullmark said. "First real session back so it was exciting. It was fun to be around the boys once again."

Ullmark said he used the recovery time to recalibrate mentally following an adverse start to the season, which included the passing of his father in Sweden in January.

"There's been going on a whole lot of stuff with this season that's been out of my control that's been way harder on me emotionally and mentally," he said. "It sucks that I got injured as well but for some reason, I kind of found some solitude and peace when I actually got injured."

"Just kind of go back into myself, just have to figure out what the next step is, and then I had a clear goal that I just had to get back to playing again. So, it was easy to set a goal and then just kind of take it day by day and try to have a smile on my face."

### **Injury report**

Granato also announced that forward Tobias Rieder and defenseman Colin Miller are day to day due to injuries. The coach expressed optimism that Miller could play Wednesday.

"That's the hope," he said. "Tobi, maybe, is more of a question mark for tomorrow in that regard."

The Sabres expect to be without forward Kyle Okposo for the remainder of the road trip due to an upper-body injury he sustained during practice on Sunday. Granato said Okposo could be ready to return to the lineup when the team plays at home next week.