



Buffalo Sabres

Daily Press Clips

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Sabres' winless streak hits 15 as Penguins roll to 5-2 win

By Will Graves

Associated Press

March 25, 2021

PITTSBURGH (AP) — The Pittsburgh Penguins are tired. They're hurting. And in a way, they're scrambling.

Nothing a visit from the reeling Buffalo Sabres can't fix.

Sidney Crosby picked up his 13th goal of the season, Tristan Jarry stopped 26 shots and the Penguins extended Buffalo's winless streak to 15 games with a 5-2 victory on Wednesday night.

Evan Rodrigues, Kris Letang, John Marino and Zach Aston-Reese scored also for the Penguins, who recovered from a sluggish three-game set against New Jersey in which they managed just one victory by pouncing on the undermanned and overmatched Sabres.

"We're a close group, a very resilient group," Marino said. "We've had a lot of come-from-behind wins, a lot of bounce-back wins (like tonight). It says a lot about the guys in the room."

Buffalo goalie Dustin Tokarski, making his first NHL start in more than five years with Carter Hutton out due to a lower-body injury, finished with 37 saves and kept the Sabres in it until late in the second period, when Marino and Aston-Reese scored just over 2 minutes apart to give the Penguins all the cushion required.

Rasmus Dahlin scored his second goal of the season and Victor Olofsson beat Jarry on a penalty shot in the third period, but the NHL's worst team remained in a tailspin.

The Sabres and Penguins complete a consecutive-night, two-game set Thursday.

Buffalo's 15-game winless streak (0-13-2) is a record for futility since the shootout was introduced during the 2005-06 season, and the league's longest stretch without a victory since Arizona went 15 games between wins from Feb. 21-March 21, 2004. The Sabres have been outscored 63-30 during their slide.

"Frustration has to be the first and the foremost," Buffalo center Curtis Lazar said. "As a team and as a whole, we have to understand playing skill-based hockey isn't going to cut it. ... Make every team earn every chance they get. ... It's on us. It's on us to right the ship here."

The Penguins haven't exactly been rolling of late, with forwards Evgeni Malkin, Brandon Tanev, Teddy Blueger and Jason Zucker out with injuries. Head coach Mike Sullivan is tinkering to see how the rest of the pieces fit, and three games against New Jersey provided little clarity.

There might not be much to glean from the performance given the current state of the Sabres, but the Penguins wasted little time taking control.

Rodrigues finished off a pretty end-to-end rush by tapping home a cross-ice feed from Sam Lafferty 7:36 into the first to put Pittsburgh in front. Letang made it 2-0 when a centering pass by Crosby from behind the Buffalo net deflected off Sabres defenseman Colin Miller right to Letang.

Tokarski gamely kept the Sabres in it, and Buffalo received a little jolt when Dahlin's long shot from the point slipped by Jarry with 2:43 to go in the first. The Penguins, who have a penchant for going into extended lulls, appeared to do just that for much of the second period before Pittsburgh's role players provided some breathing room.

Marino blasted home a shot from the right circle after solid forecheck work by Aston-Reese and Jared McCann 17:29 into the second. Aston-Reese then made it 4-1 with a short-handed goal in which recently recalled Frederick Gaudreau did all the heavy lifting, creating a turnover at the Pittsburgh blue line then fending off two Sabres before dropping it to Aston-Reese, who sent it into the vacated net.

"Honestly I had no idea he was going to give me the puck," Aston-Reese said. "I was in awe of the play. It was a really nice play."

Crosby's eighth goal in his last 12 games against the Sabres 3:57 into the third left Buffalo in an all too familiar position: woefully behind with the clock mercifully ticking down.

"Obviously we want to win," Oloffson said. "Everyone's working hard. We're just, we're not working smart all of the time. We're working hard. ... Sometimes (we) dive into a play where we shouldn't. But obviously, it's tough."

Observations: Sabres' attempt to push the pace leading to mistakes on defense

By Lance Lysowski

The Buffalo News

March 24, 2021

PITTSBURGH – Rasmus Dahlin did not hesitate to take the risk.

The 20-year-old defenseman skated deep in his offensive zone in pursuit of the puck and, more important, the confidence that's evaporated from the Buffalo Sabres during a winless streak that's spanned more than a month.

The calculated gamble was rarely seen under former coach Ralph Krueger, who prioritized responsible defense even if it led to very little offense. Not Don Granato. The interim coach is encouraging the Sabres to push the pace and use their skill to create scoring chances.

The growing pains were evident throughout Wednesday night, as the Sabres' winless streak reached a franchise-record 15 games with a 5-2 loss to the Pittsburgh Penguins in PPG Paints Arena.

Buffalo allowed three goals off odd-man rushes, beginning with Dahlin's teammates failing to cover for him at the blue line. The Penguins broke the puck out quickly to start a 2-on-1 rush and former Sabres forward Evan Rodrigues finished the play with an easy tap-in for the game's opening goal only 7:36 into the first period.

"I do believe it's part of a natural process when you're trying to move in that direction is, yes, you're going to give up some things," said Granato. "You'll start picking up the patterns of how to not expose yourself in those situations. So, again, not shocking to me that this is part of a process. But it's something that, we have to do it. We have to try and push forward and generate more and you have to learn in that process on the other side."

Across the past two games, the Sabres have allowed 82 shots on goal, including 42 in their first game of a back-to-back against the Penguins. Granato's preference to push the pace led to three high-danger scoring chances in the first period, according to NaturalStatTrick.com, but the Penguins had seven in the 20-minute span, capped by the Sabres not covering Kris Letang on the defenseman's goal from in front of the net for a 2-0 lead.

When an inability to break the puck out of the defensive zone gave Pittsburgh possession in the second period, the Sabres allowed defenseman John Marino to uncork a one-timer from the right circle that beat goalie Dustin Tokarski to make it 3-1.

"I don't think we play very smart," said Sabres defenseman Rasmus Ristolainen. "We make really stupid mistakes that lead to way too many odd-man rushes every game, and a team like Pittsburgh, they have skill up front and they had way too many odd-man rushes. Yeah, I mean, I think we should keep it very simple. We can't move so many pucks on the blue lines or in the neutral zone. We should get the pucks deep and keep it way more simple."

Zach Aston-Reese's shorthanded goal with 24 seconds remaining in the second period came on an odd-man rush that began with rookie Frederick Gaudreau stickhandling around Dahlin after intercepting a Taylor Hall pass. Sidney Crosby scored the Penguins' fifth goal on a breakaway where Buffalo defensemen Brandon Montour was caught too deep in the defensive zone in the third period.

The logic behind the philosophical shift is sound. The Sabres have scored the fewest 5-on-5 goals in the National Hockey League, and Granato is trying to maximize the potential of a lineup that includes Hall and Jeff Skinner.

Krueger used a conservative system in which defensemen sent a quick breakout pass to a forward stationed nearby in the neutral zone. The forward would then cross the red line, dump the puck behind the opponent's net and the Sabres would then pursue that puck. Krueger was risk averse, whereas Granato is trying to strike a balance between conservative and aggressive.

Significant mistakes are occurring because the Sabres' lack of confidence and urgency to score. Trading goals with the Penguins (20-11-2) is a recipe for disaster, especially when Buffalo is down 11 players, including three-time all-star center Jack Eichel, shutdown defenseman Jake McCabe and the Sabres' top two goalies.

"We have a lot of skill, but you have to find that balance," said Sabres forward Curtis Lazar. "The simple thing is throwing pucks on net. Making the other defensemen turn to try to find that puck when we're already facing it and we have a good chance at retrieving it. ... It's hard right now. We're kind of in that in-between area."

The result won't change Granato's plan for the Sabres (6-21-4). He's willing to let his players work through the growing pains across the final 25 games of what is likely to be a 10th consecutive nonplayoff season in Buffalo.

"We're in a situation where, let's expose, let's get ourselves exposed and start learning fast because we clearly need to get better," added Granato. "So, we can't be conservative and get better. We can be conservative and stay the same. But we need to get better."

Here are other observations from the game:

1. Low numbers a problem: Granato had only 10 forwards available for most of the game Wednesday night. Tage Thompson was a late scratch because of an illness, and Rasmus Asplund did not return after suffering an undisclosed injury in the first period.

General Manager Kevyn Adams did not have an open roster spot to recall a forward from the taxi squad before puck drop. Winger Kyle Okposo was added to injured reserve to make room for goalie Michael Houser. Tobias Rieder did not play because of an upper-body injury. Goalie Carter Hutton, who suffered a lower-body injury Monday, is still on the roster.

Adams will need to add a forward to the roster if the Sabres do not receive good news about Thompson and/or Asplund.

2. Goaltending crisis: Tokarski is likely not an option to play Thursday because he's faced 79 shots over the past two games. Buffalo's backup Wednesday night, Houser, has no NHL experience and hasn't appeared in an AHL game since the 2017-18 season.

Top prospect Ukko-Pekka Luukkonen was assigned to the taxi squad, but the 22-year-old hasn't played a game since March 10 and has practiced only twice since the Rochester Americans' Covid-19 pause.

Goalie Linus Ullmark, who has missed the past 14 games with a lower-body injury, returned to practice Tuesday, but it's unclear if he's ready for game action. Granato expressed optimism Tuesday that Ullmark will be ready. If not, would the Sabres really have Houser make his NHL debut?

3. Greener pastures for another ex-Sabre: Krueger had a negative impact on the performance of Sabres' forwards. Another example came Wednesday night with the performance by Rodrigues, a former Sabre who asked out of Buffalo because he could not earn a spot in the lineup under Krueger.

Rodrigues was outstanding in the first period Thursday, logging a team-high four shots on goal. He scored on a 2-on-1 pass from Sam Lafferty and had a shot from the slot stopped by Tokarski. Sure, Rodrigues isn't a full-time top-six forward, but he provides value with speed and versatility. This is another example of a player who didn't just suddenly forget how to play hockey under Krueger.

Memo to Adams: Don't hire another coach who is unwilling to use a system that fits the players on the roster.

The Wraparound: Sabres set franchise record with 15-game winless streak

By Lance Lysowski

The Buffalo News

March 24, 2021

PITTSBURGH – Through all the turnover and turmoil across the past nine seasons without playoff hockey in Buffalo, the city's beloved Sabres had never lost 15 games in a row.

Even the consecutive tank seasons from 2013-15 managed to avoid such a spell of futility. Then, along came a shortened season in which the Sabres endured numerous injuries, a two-week Covid-19 pause, a midseason coaching change and an intradivisional schedule featuring at least four legitimate Stanley Cup contenders.

None of interim coach Don Granato's strategic changes could help the Sabres avoid the dubious distinction of holding the longest winless streak in the 51-year history of the franchise.

The Sabres dropped their 15th consecutive game Wednesday at PPG Paints Arena, as a shorthanded group of 10 forwards failed to match the speed and tenacity of the Sidney Crosby-led Pittsburgh Penguins in a 5-2 loss.

"It's tough," said Sabres winger Victor Olofsson. "Obviously, we want to win and everyone's working hard. ... We're doing everything we can."

Buffalo (6-21-4) remains last in the National Hockey League, with only 16 points through 31 games – 20 points out of the East Division's fourth playoff spot – and it is only 25 games away from a 10-year playoff drought, which would match the longest in league history.

The Sabres' winless skid is the longest in the NHL since the shootout was adopted for the 2005-06 season.

The Sabres played much of the game with only 10 forwards, as Tage Thompson was a late scratch because of an illness and Rasmus Asplund did not return after suffering an undisclosed injury in the first period. Buffalo's injury list has grown to nine players: Asplund, Jack Eichel, Kyle Okposo, Tobias Rieder, Zemgus Girgensons, Jake McCabe, Will Borgen, Linus Ullmark and Carter Hutton.

"What I've learned is you have to try to not be too negative and there are things you can't do anything about -- what happened in the past," said defenseman Rasmus Ristolainen. "Go day-by-day, come every day to work and do everything you can to try to turn this around."

With their top two goalies out, the Sabres turned to Dustin Tokarski, a 31-year-old who had not started an NHL game since Dec. 21, 2015. The AHL veteran was the least of their problems, however, as the Sabres allowed 42 shots on goal.

Rasmus Dahlin's slap shot from the point in the first period, and Olofsson's penalty shot in the third were the Sabres' only goals.

Evan Rodrigues, Kris Letang, John Marino, Zach Aston-Reese and Sidney Crosby scored for the Penguins (20-11-2), who had lost three of their previous four games and were without Evgeni Malkin.

"Frustration has to be the first and foremost," said Sabres forward Curtis Lazar. "As a team, as a whole, we have to understand that playing skill-based hockey when you're in a slump is not going to cut it. We have to get back to the basics. ... Build a game, make the other team earn every chance they get. Right now we're making it too easy."

Opening salvo: Rodrigues gave the Penguins a 1-0 lead at 7:34 when he scored off a 2-on-1 pass from Sam Lafferty that went over the stick blade of Sabres defenseman Colin Miller. It was Rodrigues' first goal against his former team. He was traded to Pittsburgh in February 2020 after playing parts of five seasons in Buffalo.

Entering Wednesday, the Sabres were 2-17-2 when their opponent scored first.

Coverage mistake: No one on the Sabres thought to cover Letang, who skated uncovered toward the net and shot a loose puck past Tokarski for a 2-0 Penguins lead at 15:44 into the game.

"I guess anybody's confidence would be affected with the scenario, but they did continue to push through to the end," said interim coach Don Granato. "They skated hard. There's no question everybody's confidence goes up and down."

One slump ends: Dahlin scored his second goal of the season, and first in 21 games, on a slap shot from the point that fooled Penguins goalie Tristan Jarry and cut the Sabres' deficit to 2-1 at 17:17 in the first period.

Barrage: Tokarski had a strong showing in the first period, stopping 18 of 20 shots, including chances from the slot by Rodrigues and Anthony Angello.

Collapse continues: After the Sabres failed to break the puck out of their own zone, Penguins forward Jared McCann carried the puck around the back of the Sabres' net and passed to Marino, whose one-timer beat Tokarski for a 3-1 lead at 17:29 into the second period.

"I don't think we played very smart," said Ristolainen. "We made really stupid mistakes that lead to way too many odd-man rushes every game and a team like Pittsburgh, they have skill up front, and they had way too many odd-man rushes. I think we should keep it very simple."

Not-so-special teams: The Sabres' woes on the power play continued with Eichel out. Penguins forward Frederick Gaudreau intercepted a Taylor Hall pass, stickhandled around Dahlin in the neutral zone and passed to Aston-Reese to push the score to 4-1 with 24 seconds remaining in the second period.

It was Buffalo's second shorthanded goal allowed this season.

Job search: TSN's Bob McKenzie reported that Sabres general manager Kevyn Adams will interview Jason Karmanos for the assistant general manager opening Thursday. Karmanos was a longtime assistant general manager under Jim Rutherford in Carolina and Pittsburgh, winning three Stanley Cups between the two stops.

Late scratch: Thompson was unavailable after he felt ill. Thompson skated Wednesday morning and produced the necessary Covid-19 test, but he did not feel well enough to play. He stayed at the team hotel and was replaced in the lineup by defenseman Matt Irwin.

"We didn't find out until right before coming to the rink that he wasn't feeling good, so just out of a precaution we had him stay at the hotel to not complicate things more," said Granato.

Roster move: Prior to the game, the Sabres activated goalie Michael Houser from the taxi squad to backup Tokarski. Houser, a 28-year-old whose 283 games of pro experience have been in the AHL and the ECHL, grew up in a Pittsburgh suburb and played youth hockey in the area.

Next: The Sabres will complete the back-to-back Thursday night against the Penguins in PPG Paints Arena. Puck drop is scheduled for 7 p.m., Eastern.

Sabres' Ukko-Pekka Luukkonen's taxi squad assignment is intro to life as an NHLer

By Lance Lysowski
The Buffalo News
March 24, 2021

PITTSBURGH – Ukko-Pekka Luukkonen was watching the Buffalo Sabres' game Monday night when an injury occurred at Madison Square Garden that altered the organization's goaltending plan.

Carter Hutton, the Sabres' 35-year-old goaltender, suffered a lower-body injury that forced him to exit in the first period of a 5-3 loss to the New York Rangers. Dustin Tokarski, thrust into a backup role when Jonas Johansson was traded, took over and stopped 33 of 37 shots in his first NHL action since Oct. 28, 2016.

With Hutton in Buffalo for medical testing and starting goalie Linus Ullmark still working his way back from a lower-body injury, Sabres management called on Luukkonen to join the team in Pittsburgh. The 22-year-old top prospect was added to the taxi squad and participated in an optional morning skate Wednesday in PPG Paints Arena ahead of a game against the Penguins.

"First of all, I'm just trying to learn as much as I can here," said Luukkonen, a second-round pick in 2017. "It has been a great experience to be here. We have a lot of great players here, all the coaching staff is really good. There's a lot to learn from them, and, of course, seeing Linus back on the ice, there's a lot to learn from him, too. So, I will try to focus on those things they tell me do."

This is not how the Sabres planned to introduce Luukkonen to the National Hockey League. He's only appeared in 42 professional games between the ECHL and American Hockey League, including eight this season with the Rochester Americans.

Luukkonen has not appeared in a game since March 10, a 3-2 shootout loss at Utica that preceded a Covid-19 pause. He practiced in Rochester for the first time Wednesday before leaving for Pittsburgh to join the Sabres.

Ullmark, 27, has skated each of the past two days and interim coach Don Granato expressed hope that Ullmark can play Thursday night against Pittsburgh.

This is an opportunity for Luukkonen to work with goalie coach Mike Bales and take shots from the Sabres in morning skates and, potentially, practices. In eight starts in Rochester this season, Luukkonen totaled a 3.19 goals-against average and .904 save percentage.

His game has been much better technically because he had a full offseason to train on and off the ice. That wasn't the case in the summer of 2019 as Luukkonen was still recovering from double hip surgery, a procedure that impacted his play last season. The surgery came after a season in which Luukkonen captured a gold medal with Finland at the IIHF World Junior Championship and earned Ontario Hockey League MVP honors for his outstanding performance with Sudbury.

"I think all the positioning, the game is all around more solid," Luukkonen said. "I feel like the positioning and being in the right place and not overreacting or overplaying situations, I think that is the base for being more – I don't know – reactive in the goal and being more comfortable with the shots. I think coming from Europe where the ice is bigger, too, kind of getting into the smaller ice here I feel like having the better positioning and more stable game has helped me a lot."

With improved lower-body strength, Luukkonen set out for Finland's Liiga during the NHL's pause last fall, producing a .908 save percentage in 13 games with TPS Turku before his loan agreement ended in December. Instruction from Sabres goalie development coach Seamus Kotyk and TPS goalie coach Ari Moisanen helped Luukkonen clean up the areas of his game impacted by the surgery.

It's unclear how long Luukkonen will remain with the team. The Sabres would prefer he play games in Rochester as opposed to taking shots in Buffalo's practices. This also isn't the ideal time or situation for Luukkonen to make his NHL debut. Regardless of how long he's around, Luukkonen can use this introduction as a learning experience for when he's finally called upon to play in a game.

"Every moment you're with the NHL team is big," Granato said. "You have to acclimate and feel that you belong and take ownership of being at that level, and when you do, those players flourish, they play to their actual potential at that time. So, confidence is an enormous part of it, that self-projection. So, the more time a prospect can get around it, the easier it becomes for them to associate, 'Yes, I belong here.' It moves from a dream to a reality for every player in that regard. So, it's a big moment."

Filling in

If Luukkonen remains with the Sabres this week, the Amerks will likely turn to goalie Stefanos Lekkas for their scheduled game Friday night against Syracuse in Rochester's Blue Cross Arena.

Lekkas, 25, joined the Amerks on a professional tryout shortly after the team returned to practice from the Covid-19 pause. He previously appeared in nine games this season with the ECHL's Fort Wayne Komets, posting a 6-1-2 record and .920 save percentage. Lekkas played collegiately at the University of Vermont, totaling a .918 save percentage in 134 NCAA games.

Sabres game day: Avoiding record-setting skid will require road win

By Lance Lysowski

The Buffalo News

March 24, 2021

Matchup: Buffalo Sabres (6-20-4) vs. Pittsburgh Penguins (19-11-2)

Where: PPG Paints Arena

When: 8 p.m.

TV: NBCSN

Radio: WGR 550

PITTSBURGH – The Sabres could make history Wednesday night in PPG Paints Arena.

This isn't the kind of milestone General Manager Kevyn Adams envisioned when he took the job in June. With a loss against the Pittsburgh Penguins, the Sabres will set a franchise record with a 15-game winless streak.

Their 14 consecutive defeats are the longest drought for any team since the Phoenix Coyotes lost 15 in a row from Feb. 21 to March 21, 2004. The Sabres have not won a game since Feb. 23, posting a 0-12-2 record while being outscored 59-23. Their 16 points through 30 games are tied for the second fewest in franchise history. Only the 2013-14 Sabres had fewer points (14) during the first 30 games.

Nine teams in the NHL have 20 or more wins, led by the league-leading Tampa Bay Lightning (24). The Sabres are 20 points out of the fourth and final playoff spot in the East Division.

"Obviously, there would be a vulnerability if things don't go right from the standpoint of confidence and swings," Sabres interim coach Don Granato said. "We're trying to, as a coaching staff, instill confidence that we will push through this. We'll get to the other side. I believe our guys are in a good mindset with respect to that. I also believe they're tactically dialed in on things that can bring consistency and more control to them individually and collectively as a group.

"They're identifying with things that can really push them out of this but also give them foundational confidence to win on a more consistent basis. And when I say win, win little battles, win situations. Eventually those things add up to winning games."

Lineup: Since both morning skates Wednesday were "optional," the Penguins did not allow media to attend. Thus, we do not know Granato's possible lines/pairings for the third meeting between the two teams. Here's how the Sabres lined up Monday against the Rangers:

Defenseman Colin Miller (upper body) and winger Tobias Rieder (upper body) may not play. Granato told the media following practice Tuesday that Rieder is more of a "question mark," while he expressed hope that Miller will be in the lineup. Winger Kyle Okposo is out with an upper-body injury.

The Penguins, meanwhile, are without Evgeni Malkin, Jason Zucker, Brandon Tanev and Teddy Blueger:

Revenge game: The Sabres' Dustin Tokarski, a 31-year-old two-time Calder Cup champion in the American Hockey League, will start his first NHL game since Dec. 21, 2015, a 5-1 loss in which he allowed three goals on 14 shots for the Montreal Canadiens.

Tokarski stopped 33 of 37 shots in relief of Carter Hutton on Monday night in Madison Square Garden. Tokarski also will face some familiar faces, as he spent last season with the Penguins' AHL affiliate and played under current Pittsburgh assistant coach Mike Vellucci.

Tristan Jarry (12-8-2, .909) will be in goal for the Penguins, according to coach Mike Sullivan.

Man in the middle: Between Jack Eichel's injury and Eric Staal's inevitable exit, it's clear the Sabres will keep rookie forward Dylan Cozens at center for the rest of the season. Granato, though, told the media Wednesday morning that he won't hesitate to use Cozens on the wing if the situation calls for it. Don't be surprised if Cozens shifts to the wing with the Sabres using only three lines late in a game.

Granato spoke highly of Cozens' versatility and how the 20-year-old has handled the jump to the National Hockey League.

"He's an intelligent player," Granato said of Cozens. "You think about where he's at in his career now, what he went through in the last year. You're a first-round pick. The spotlight is on you and you're a world junior player two times in a row where the spotlight is on you. You came to training camp last year, you went through all those experiences. ...

"Dylan processes those things really well, really fast. He's a fast learner and you combine that with his skill, his talent and his character and his competitiveness, which we've seen, you really have an exciting prospect and player. He's already a very good NHL player, but I say prospect because he's going to grow and he's going to continue to grow fast."

More of the same: The Sabres' power play is lost without Eichel. Across the past 13 games, Buffalo is 0-for-21 on the man advantage. Drawing penalties is part of the problem. This team doesn't have the puck enough in the offensive zone to earn opportunities on the power play.

Perhaps the additional practice time the past few days provided Granato with time to make changes.

"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," said Staal. "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."

Skinner watch: We're suddenly seeing the 2018-19 version of Jeff Skinner, when the two-time all-star scored 40 goals to earn a \$72 million contract from the Sabres. Skinner has scored twice in the past three games, setting season highs in ice time (16:55) and shots on goal (six) Monday against New York. The 29-year-old left wing remains on a 5-on-5 line with Curtis Lazar and Casey Mittelstadt.

The trio will be a line to watch Wednesday night since they will likely face the Penguins' AHL-quality bottom six. Unsurprisingly, Granato prioritized finding a way to put Skinner in a position to succeed.

"Well, excitement, and my first conversation with Jeff was just that," Granato said on what's been different with Skinner. "I felt an obligation to get him excited about playing, about scoring, about impacting outcomes, and I told him I was going to work on that from my side. Obviously, the coaching position itself, you hold a lot of leverage in that regard in what you present the players and what you present the team and focus points.

"Everybody knew we needed scoring and he's a guy that can score. So, it was an easy situation for me and it went hand in hand with him. So, I'm excited to see him. On the bench, you see the energy, you see the life. In practice, it's the same."

OPINION: Sabres set new franchise low with 15th-consecutive loss

By Brayton J. Wilson

WGR 550

March 25, 2021

On a night when the Buffalo Sabres were looking to avoid making history, they come up with another miserable dud in a 5-2 loss to the Pittsburgh Penguins at PPG Paints Arena.

With Wednesday's loss, the Sabres have dropped their 15th-consecutive game, setting a new franchise record that was set during the 2014-15 season when Buffalo lost 14-consecutive games in regulation.

Sadly for the Sabres, there is no telling when this slide is going to come to an end.

For a third-straight game, the Sabres were outshot by a considerable margin. Buffalo was outshot 42-28 by the Penguins on Wednesday, and have combined to be outshot 119-71 in this stretch. In terms of goals, the Sabres have been outscored 14-6 over this span.

Don Granato has been the interim head coach in Buffalo for the past three games, and he wants to see his team play with a certain pace to their game going forward. While that pace has led to more offensive rushes and more speed to the game, it has also led to too many scoring chances-against at the other end of the ice.

"To play with pace and to adapt to that, it may open up until you understand how to not do that and not open it up. That's the quest for us as coaches, and I do believe it's part of a natural process," Granato said following the loss. "When you're trying to move in that direction, yes, you're going to give up some things that you'll start picking up the patterns of how to not expose yourself in those situations. It's not shocking to me. This part of a process, but we have to do it. We have to try to push forward and generate more, and you have to learn in that process on the other side."

With the pace that the Sabres are trying to play at now, it is also leading to more defensemen getting up in the rush and trying to get active offensively. While this is often an aspect any person wants to be able to see, it cost the Sabres on their first goal-against on the night.

After a nice defensive play to clear the puck out from the front of the net, Rasmus Dahlin started the transition the other way and decided to activate in the attack. However, the play quickly broke down in the offensive end and turned into a 3-on-1 rush coming back. No forward took notice to help support Colin Miller trying to defend, but Miller failed to defend the pass from Sam Lafferty across the Evan Rodrigues streaking in on the Buffalo net.

The former Sabres forward was able to easily tap in the puck past goalie Dustin Tokarski for his third goal of the season.

Later in the period, the Sabres failed to clear the puck out of their own end, which resulted in Pittsburgh's second goal of the night. The Penguins did get a lucky bounce when Sidney Crosby's passing attempt re-directed off Miller's stick and went right to a wide-open Kris Letang streaking in from the point.

Buffalo did have an appropriate response just 93 seconds later when Dahlin was able to blast a shot past Penguins goalie Tristan Jarry for his second goal of the season. For Dahlin, it was his first goal in 20 games, while Taylor Hall picked up his first point in seven games with his secondary assist on the goal.

While the score was 2-1 through the opening 20 minutes of play, the shot total favored the Penguins, 21-12, while the scoring chances was nearly three-times in favor of the Penguins.

Tokarski was about the only player keeping the Sabres alive through much of the opening 40 minutes, as he stood on his head to make 30 saves on 34 shots faced. The Sabres showed very little life in the second period, which was a shame given that Tokarski was doing all he could to keep the team in the game.

The Sabres, once again, failed to clear the puck out of their own zone with less than three minutes left in the second when Colton Sceviour attacked Cody Eakin and easily forced a turnover. Seconds later, John Marino was able to blast away a one-timer past Tokarski to up the Pittsburgh lead to 3-1.

If there was a positive note to Wednesday's game was Buffalo's penalty kill was a perfect 5-for-5 on a night that saw some very questionable officiating throughout.

On the flip side, the power play continues to be abysmal, going 0-for-3 and giving up a shorthanded goal late in the second period.

Although Hall showed up on the scoresheet, he had one of, if not the worst game of his short Sabres career, including a terrible turnover on the power play that ended up in the back of Buffalo's net. Being pressed hard by Frederick Gaudreau, Hall tried to force a pass to Dahlin that was broken up by the Penguins forward. Gaudreau was then able to dangle through Dahlin in the neutral zone before taking the puck in on net. Instead of shooting, Gaudreau knew he had Zach Aston-Reese trailing, and the two connected for the goal that ended up being the dagger.

After a better performance on Monday against the New York Rangers, Dahlin did not have his best performance on Wednesday, despite scoring a goal. He continues to lack awareness in the defensive zone, while his confidence with the puck continues to take a hit with each and every mistake he's making.

The 20-year-old ended his night with two shots on goal, five hits, one blocked shot, a minus-2 rating, a penalty and a stick to the face that left him bloodied in just 15:29 of total ice-time. Oh yeah, that high-stick went completely uncalled.

Crosby finished the scoring for Pittsburgh with his 13th goal of the season to make it a 5-1 game. The Penguins captain continues his career dominance of the Sabres with another two-point night, upping his point total to 67 points (23+44) in just 45 games played against Buffalo.

If there's one more positive from this game is the Sabres scored on a penalty shot. Victor Olofsson scored his ninth goal of the season after drawing the opportunity when he slipped behind the Penguins defense on the rush. His attempt was able to beat Jarry through the five-hole to make the score 5-2, but that ended up being all the Sabres could muster on the night.

"It's tough. Obviously we want to win, everyone is working hard and, I don't know, we're not working smart all the time," said Olofsson after the loss. "We're working hard, [but sometimes] we want it too much. Sometimes we dive in to a play where we shouldn't, but we're doing everything we can. We just have to keep working."

With the loss, the Sabres are now 6-21-4 on the 2020-21 season, and 0-13-2 in this 15-game winless streak. During this unfortunate run, Buffalo has been outscored 63-25 by the opposition.

In case you were wondering, the longest winless streak in NHL history is held by the Winnipeg Jets in the 1980-81 season, where they went 30-straight games without a win, going 0-23-7.

Of note from this game, Sabres forward Tage Thompson did not play after he was a late scratch from the lineup due to an illness. Granato said after the game that he stayed back at the team hotel, and didn't find out about his illness until right before the group was leaving for the rink.

The Sabres ended up dressing defenseman Matt Irwin and went with just 11 forwards and seven defensemen for the game.

Also of note, forward Rasmus Asplund only played two minutes before being forced to leave the game with an undisclosed injury. Asplund appeared to take a high hit earlier in the game that left him a bit woozy as he headed off the ice. Granato said the team continues to monitor his situation, but it doesn't look good for his availability for the next game.

If you liked watching the outcome of Wednesday night's game, well then you're certainly in luck! These two teams will square off again on Thursday night at PPG Paints Arena to wrap up their two-game set in Pittsburgh.

Faceoff on Thursday is set for 7 p.m. ET with pregame coverage with Mike Schopp and the Bulldog on WGR starting at 6 p.m. ET.

OPINION: Three observations: Sabres can't recover in 15th-straight loss in Pittsburgh

By TJ Luckman

WGR 550

March 24, 2021

The winless streak has officially hit 15.

That's a new franchise record for the Buffalo Sabres, who most recently went winless in 14-straight games back in the 2014-15 season when Ted Nolan was behind the bench for his second stint as head coach.

The Sabres were never really in this one to break their streak either, as the Pittsburgh Penguins were all over Buffalo in a 5-2 win at the PPG Paints Arena.

Let's take a look at three observations from Wednesday night's game:

1.) Sabres down early and never recover

It's happened in many different ways for the Sabres in the first period. More often than not, it's their opponent who scores the first goal of the game, and Wednesday was no exception.

The Penguins attacked Buffalo early, and it was former Sabres, current Penguins forward Evan Rodrigues who struck first, tapping in a great pass in a 3-on-1 situation from Sam Lafferty just 7:36 into the game.

The Penguins peppered Sabres netminder Dustin Tokarski with 21 shots in the first period, and for the most part, Tokarski did his job in stopping shots he should be stopping, while sprinkling in some miraculous saves in the process.

The Penguins struck again later to put themselves up 2-0 with a goal from Kris Letang, finding a deflected puck in front of Tokarski forced on a play behind the net by Penguins captain Sidney Crosby. His pass deflected off Colin Miller directly to the front of Tokarski. All Letang had to do with shoot the puck with no one on him.

Sabres defenseman Rasmus Dahlin scored to put the Sabres within one, but things unraveled from there.

2.) Second periods have been brutal for Buffalo

Once again, the second period was a problem for the Sabres.

Buffalo hasn't fared well in second periods this year. They've scored just 26 goals in the middle frame, the eighth-least amount in the NHL. On the defensive side, Buffalo has allowed 44 goals in second periods, the second-most allowed only to the Ottawa Senators' 48 goals.

That's not good for a team that frequently trails their opponent heading into the second period.

Buffalo has a lot of things to figure out, and this is only one of them on a long list of things.

3.) Rasmus Dahlin is having a rough go of it

The former first overall pick of the Buffalo Sabres is certainly not performing like that status in the 2020-21 season.

Dahlin was expected to turn a corner in his development this season, but nobody thought the corner he was turning would leave him worse off.

Dahlin averages 16:36 time-on-ice per-game at 5-on-5, fourth on the Sabres among defensemen. In all situations, he averages 20:52 per-game, just a couple of minutes behind Rasmus Ristolainen.

The 20-year-old defenseman had one of his toughest games with the Sabres on Wednesday night. He was on the ice for a couple of goals-against at 5-on-5, as well as a shorthanded goal in which Dahlin couldn't handle a bad

pass from Sabres forward Taylor Hall. Dahlin became unbalanced on the play as Penguins forward Frédéric Gaudreau deked around him and used his speed to generate a chance that the Penguins ultimately converted with Zach Aston-Reese being the beneficiary.

While Dahlin is not a lost cause, there are definitely some concerns about his game. He hasn't really increased his ice time since his rookie season, actually taking a bit of a cut in that area from his rookie season to sophomore season, but this year he's back to the ice time he was getting as a rookie. The biggest difference has been competition, the quality of which has increased this season with Dahlin playing tougher minutes.

Dahlin will be someone to keep an eye on as the season draws closer to the end.

Buffalo gets a chance to stop the bleeding on Thursday night against this same Penguins team at PPG Paints Arena.

We'll have coverage of this one starting at 6 p.m. ET with the Paul William Beltz Pregame Show hosted by Schopp and the Bulldog. Puck drop is schedule for just after 7 p.m. ET on the radio flagship station of the Sabres - WGR Sports Radio 550.

Winless streak reaches 15 games for Sabres

By Pat Malacaro

WGR 550

March 24, 2021

Dustin Tokarski made 37 saves for the Buffalo Sabres, but the Pittsburgh Penguins were able to take advantage of early offense for a 5-2 win on Wednesday night at PPG Paints Arena.

Evan Rodrigues broke the scoreless tie over seven minutes into the first period. The ex-Sabres forward collected his third goal of the season against his former team, which made it 1-0 Pittsburgh. Sam Lafferty and Mark Jankowski were credited with assists on the game's first goal.

The Sabres' deficit doubled with just over four minutes remaining in the opening stanza. Kris Letang was able to move in from the blue line and receive a pass in the slot that he was able to convert for his sixth goal of the season. Sidney Crosby made the pass that setup the goal, the Penguins captain received an assist, along with Bryan Rust.

A clean face-off draw win in the offensive zone resulted in the Sabres' first goal of the game to cut their deficit to 2-1 late in the first. Eric Staal won the draw for Buffalo, with the puck eventually finding its way to Rasmus Dahlin. The defenseman's shot from the blue line beat Tristan Jarry for his second goal of the season. Taylor Hall and Brandon Montour assisted on the goal.

The Sabres went to the power play for the first time late in the second period when John Marino was called for hooking. Buffalo's opportunity was short lived when Dahlin was penalized for tripping on a play in the defensive zone.

Pittsburgh appeared to extend the lead back to two goals late in the middle period. However, the puck was hit by an errant high stick by a Penguins' player and then touched by a teammate before scoring. The goal was immediately waived off and kept the score 2-1 in favor of the home team.

Marino was able to notch his second goal of the season to give Pittsburgh a 3-1 lead. Then, with less than a minute to go in the period, Zach Aston-Reese scored a short handed goal that ballooned the lead to 4-1 over Buffalo. Aston-Reese also assisted on the third goal of the game for Pittsburgh for a two-point night.

Crosby used a breakaway opportunity to build a 5-1 lead for Pittsburgh early in the third period. Jake Guentzel was credited with the lone assist on the Penguins captain's 13th goal of the season.

Victor Olofsson was credited with a penalty shot opportunity when he was hooked on a breakaway. The forward was able to beat Jarry with the opportunity and cut the Penguins lead to three, 5-2.

In the end, Buffalo was outshot 42-28 on the night, and the score reflected it with the final being 5-2.

GAME SUMMARY

Goal Summary:

First Period:

BUF: 17:17 - Rasmus Dahlin (2) (Brandon Montour, Taylor Hall)

PIT: 7:36 - Evan Rodrigues (3) (Sam Lafferty, Mark Jankowski); 15:44 - Kris Letang (6) (Sidney Crosby, Bryan Rust)

Second Period:

BUF: NONE

PIT: 17:29 - John Marino (2) (Jared McCann, Zach Aston-Reese); 19:36 - Zach Aston-Reese (7) SHG (Frederick Gaudreau)

Third Period:

BUF: 14:35 - Victor Olofsson (9) PENALTY SHOT
PIT: 3:57 - Sidney Crosby (13) (Jake Guentzel)

Penalty Summary:

First Period:

BUF: 19:35 - Rasmus Ristolainen (Cross-checking - 2 min.)
PIT: NONE

Second Period:

BUF: 5:41 - Rasmus Ristolainen (Interference - 2 min.); 14:31 - Rasmus Dahlin (Tripping - 2 min.)
PIT: 13:55 - John Marino (Hooking - 2 min.); 19:04 - Mark Jankowski (Interference - 2 min.)

Third Period:

BUF: 2:19 - Jacob Bryson (Hooking - 2 min.); 18:30 - Eric Staal (Cross-checking - 2 min.)
PIT: 3:17 - Kris Letang (Hooking - 2 min.)

STATS OF THE GAME:

Losi and Gangi Three Stars of the Game:

- 1.) Sidney Crosby - PIT
- 2.) Zach Aston-Reese - PIT
- 3.) Frederick Gaudreau - PIT

What's Next

The Sabres and Penguins will meet again on Thursday night in Pittsburgh. The puck drops just after 7 p.m. ET on the flagship home of the Sabres Radio Network - WGR Sports Radio 550. The Paul William Beltz Pregame Shows starts our coverage with Mike Schopp and the Bulldog at 6 p.m. ET.

Sabres look to snap out of losing funk against Penguins

By Brayton J. Wilson

WGR 550

March 24, 2021

The Buffalo Sabres are looking to avoid history on Wednesday night when they face the Pittsburgh Penguins in the first game of a back-to-back set at PPG Paints Arena.

With a loss, the Sabres would set a new franchise record for longest winless streak of 15-consecutive games. The franchise record was set back in the 2014-15 season when the Sabres lost 14 games in a row in regulation, which included going winless in the month of January.

In this current stretch for the Sabres, the team has gone 0-12-2 and have been outscored 58-23 by the opposition.

In case you were wondering, the longest winless streak in NHL history is held by the Winnipeg Jets in the 1980-81 season, where they went 30-straight games without a win, going 0-23-7.

The Sabres' 2020-21 season has spiraled completely out of control with the team sitting all by itself in the basement of the NHL standings. With their 6-20-4 overall record and 16 points, Buffalo sits eight points behind the Anaheim Ducks and Detroit Red Wings for 30th place in the standings. In terms of points percentage, the Sabres also sit in last place at .267. Anaheim and Detroit are the next teams ahead of Buffalo at 3.64

When looking at the East Division, Buffalo is a full 12 points behind the New Jersey Devils for seventh place, while sitting a whopping 30 points back of the New York Islanders for first place. The Sabres are 24 points behind the Penguins, who currently sit in third in the division with a 19-11-2 record and 40 points.

Don Granato is just two games into his new role with the Sabres as interim head coach. His first game behind the bench was an ugly 4-1 loss to the Boston Bruins last Thursday, but the team did not hold a morning skate that day due to COVID-19 protocols.

After a few days off and a couple good practices in Buffalo, the team responded much better on Monday in a 5-3 loss to the New York Rangers on Monday. Even though the Sabres got outshot 40-19 in the loss, they showed a good amount of fight, especially in the third period when down 3-1 and tying the game within the first 4:22 of the final 20 minutes.

If the Sabres can put together more efforts like Monday and find some more consistency over a 60-minute period, the wins should start to come for the group.

The Sabres got some good news on Tuesday when goalie Linus Ullmark returned to the ice for his first practice in nearly a month. The 27-year-old suffered a lower-body injury in Game 1 of their winless streak on Feb. 25 against the Devils.

While there is no timetable for a possible return to the lineup, Ullmark's impending return to the net is a welcoming sight for the Sabres, who find themselves in a goaltending dilemma.

After trading goalie Jonas Johansson to the Colorado Avalanche on Saturday, the Sabres turned to the tandem of Carter Hutton and Dustin Tokarski in goal, while Michael Houser would serve as the taxi squad goalie after signing an NHL contract on Friday.

Early in Monday's loss to the Rangers, Hutton ended up leaving the game with a lower-body injury after a collision with forward Julien Gauthier. That forced Tokarski into the game, where he played very admirably with 33 saves on 37 shots faced.

So until Ullmark comes back to the lineup, Buffalo will be forced to turn to Tokarski and Houser in net, while top goalie prospect Ukko-Pekka Luukkonen has been called up from the Rochester Americans in the American Hockey League and was loaned to the taxi squad.

It will likely be Tokarski in net for Buffalo on Wednesday, as he's set to get his first NHL start since the 2015-16 season while with the Montreal Canadiens. His last start saw him get shelled in a 5-1 loss to the Nashville Predators on Dec. 21, 2015, where he gave up three goals-against in 43:08 of ice-time.

Tokarski's effort in relief on Monday was his first NHL action since the 2016-17 season with the Anaheim Ducks.

Jeff Skinner was, arguably, Buffalo's best player on the ice in Monday's loss to the Rangers. The 28-year-old winger seemed to be all over the ice, creating chances and getting pucks to the net. He finished the night with six of Buffalo's 19 shots on goal, 16:44 of ice-time (the most he's had all season), and the game-tying goal in the third period after a nice breakout pass from defenseman Brandon Montour.

Granato felt it was his obligation to talk with Skinner when he took over as head coach to get him excited about his opportunity to be more of an impact player on the Sabres, which includes scoring goals.

Buffalo's interim head coach also felt that youngsters Dylan Cozens and Rasmus Dahlin had good games on Monday in New York.

Cozens made his return to the lineup after suffering a concussion the first time the Sabres played the Penguins nearly two weeks ago back in Buffalo. The 20-year-old scored the first of two goals early in the third period to pull the game to within a goal, while also registering a hit and winning 63% of his faceoffs in 19:12 of total ice-time.

As for Dahlin, he did look better and more comfortable with the puck on Monday, as he finished the night with two shots on goal, three hits and a blocked shot in 18:56 of total ice-time.

As for the Penguins, they will be without Evgeni Malkin on a week-to-week basis as he deals with a lower-body injury. The 34-year-old has played the Sabres well throughout his entire career with 58 points (19+39) in 44 career games. In his two games this season against Buffalo, Malkin has scored a goal and two assists for three points.

Also out of the lineup on Wednesday for Pittsburgh will be forward Brandon Tanev, who is considered day-to-day with an upper-body injury. Tanev has contributed well in his second season with the Penguins, scoring seven goals and adding eight assists for 15 points in 30 games played. In his two games against the Sabres this season, the 29-year-old has a goal and an assist.

Sidney Crosby will look to continue his hot stretch of games against the Sabres in his career. The Penguins captain has 65 career points (22+43) in just 44 games against Buffalo, and already has a goal and an assist in the two games this season.

Overall, Crosby is Pittsburgh leading scorer this season with 32 points (12+20) in 31 games.

Jake Guentzel leads the Penguins this season with 13 goals in 32 games. Two of the goals scored this season have come against the Sabres, both of which coming on the power play.

Tristan Jarry was in net for Pittsburgh when he earned a 5-2 win over the Sabres back on March 11. The 25-year-old was not tested much on that night, only forced to face 23 shots on the night.

Jarry will get the nod in goal for the Penguins on Wednesday. He is 12-8-0 overall this season in 22 games played with a 2.86 goals-against average and a .909 save percentage.

Faceoff at PPG Paints Arena is set for 8 p.m. ET with the Paul William Beltz Pregame Show kicking off coverage at 7 p.m. ET with Brian Koziol. During the pregame, you will hear Granato's pregame conference call, plus more from Ullmark and Luukkonen.

With the game being televised nationally on NBCSN, the only place to hear the local play-by-play with Dan Dunleavy and Rob Ray is on the radio home of the Sabres - WGR Sports Radio 550.

Sabres fall to Penguins, lose 15th straight: 'We're not working smart'

By Bill Hoppe
Olean Times Herald
March 24, 2021

The hapless Buffalo Sabres kept hanging around Wednesday, trailing by one goal late in the second period despite being outshot by nearly a two-to-one margin.

No one, of course, expected the Sabres would win. But right now, they're so bad a one-goal deficit is noteworthy.

That narrow margin did not last. The Pittsburgh Penguins pulled ahead late in the second period, capitalizing on two miscues from struggling winger Taylor Hall to take a commanding lead and cruise to a 5-2 victory.

The Sabres' winless streak has hit a franchise-record 15 games.

They have 25 games remaining in what has become perhaps the worst season in their 51-year history. They haven't won since Feb. 23.

When will they win another contest?

Their East Division schedule is relentless, with games against heavyweights nearly every other night until the season mercifully ends May 8. They play the Penguins again tonight.

Interim coach Don Granato acknowledged the Sabres are having trouble adjusting on the fly to the faster pace he wants them to play. That has led to more miscues and opponents pumping 82 shots on goal in the last two games, including 42 on Wednesday against goalie Dustin Tokarski.

Granato said those "very simple things that can be corrected really quick."

"There's urgency to doing that," he said.

The Sabres also keep pressing, forcing plays or trying something fancy when something simple would be the best option.

"I feel like we're not working smart at all the time," said winger Victor Olofsson, who scored the Sabres' second goal on a penalty shot. "We're working hard and we want it too much. I mean, sometimes we might dive into a play where we shouldn't, etc."

Sabres defenseman Rasmus Ristolainen said: "I don't think we play very smart. We make really stupid mistakes that lead to way too many odd-man rushes every game."

Sabres center Curtis Lazar said playing skill-based hockey in a slump is "not going to cut it."

"We have to get back to the basics and really just will our way to a win," he said. "Build a game, make the other team earn every chance they get. Right now, we're making it too easy. I feel like we're too soft in the D-zone. We're throwing pucks away when, if you don't have anything, just hold onto it, wait for support to come around."

"Yeah, I mean, until we do that it's going to continue to get frustrating. But it's on us. It's on us to right the ship here."

The Sabres trailed 2-1 late in the second period before the Penguins converted Hall's mistakes.

First, instead of skating the puck out of his own zone or making a simple feed as the Penguins changed, Hall made an ill-advised pass through the middle of the ice. Seconds later, John Marino scored at 17:29.

Then when Hall tried to force a pass to defenseman Rasmus Ristolainen at the point during a power play, Frederick Gaudreau stole the puck and blew by Dahlin, creating Zach Aston-Reese's goal at 19:36.

If Tokarski did not make some key saves early, the Sabres would've fallen out of the game before the first period ended inside PPG Paints Arena.

"He's been phenomenal for us both these games, he's made some really big saves for us," Olofsson said. "I feel like it's just time to pay it back to him and play some better hockey."

Granato did not have updates wingers Rasmus Asplund or Tage Thompson. Asplund left the game early and did not return. Thompson, meanwhile, missed the game because of illness.

Dahlin scored the Sabres' other goal.

Sabres goalie prospect Ukko-Pekka Luukkonen excited for first taste of NHL

By Bill Hoppe

Olean Times Herald

March 24, 2021

If injured Buffalo Sabres goalie Linus Ullmark keeps progressing, he could play this week, perhaps as soon as Thursday. So Ukko-Pekka Luukkonen's first taste of the NHL might be brief.

Still, spending just a day or two with the Sabres, even on the taxi squad as their third goalie, should be a significant step for Luukkonen's development.

"The more time a prospect can get around (the NHL), the easier it becomes for them to associate, 'Yes, I belong here,'" interim Sabres coach Don Granato said on a Zoom call prior to Wednesday's 5-2 road loss to the Pittsburgh Penguins. "It moves from a dream to a reality for every player in that regard. So it's a big moment."

The Sabres recalled Luukkonen, their top goalie prospect, on Tuesday after Carter Hutton suffered a lower-body injury in Monday's 5-3 loss to the New York Rangers.

Luukkonen said he was watching the game and learned later that night the Sabres would summon him from the Rochester Americans to the taxi squad. He skated Tuesday morning in Rochester before leaving for Pittsburgh.

The Finn participated in the Sabres' optional workout Wednesday morning inside PPG Paints Arena.

"It's been an exciting couple of days for me," said Luukkonen, a second-round pick in 2017, 54th overall.

He added: "There's going to be a lot to learn from here."

Sabres goalie Dustin Tokarski start Wednesday's game and was backed up by Michael Houser, who has spent most of this season as Rochester's backup.

The Amerks' recent COVID-19 pause and postponements related to the Utica Comets' COVID problems have limited Luukkonen's practice time and game action. He hasn't played since March 10.

Luukkonen has started eight of the Amerks' 10 games this season, compiling a 5-2-1 record with a 3.19 goals-against average and a .904 save percentage.

Luukkonen needs consistent work to keep developing, so the Amerks want him to play the bulk of their 32-game schedule.

He played most of 2019-20, his rookie season, with the Cincinnati Cyclones, earning ECHL All-Star honors. He also played 10 games with the Amerks.

He spent the early part of this season on loan to HC TPS, a Liiga team in Finland, posting a 6-3-4 mark with a 2.52 goals-against average and a .908 save percentage in 13 games, according to eliteprospects.com.

"I took some great steps there," Luukkonen said. "We had good coaching there, too, so I was really fortunate to play (with TPS) at the start of the season. I think being back again in Finland in a professional environment, you learn from the older guys to become more professional and to be a better goalie and better player all around."

Luukkonen has learned to settle down and utilize his 6-foot-5, 196-pound frame. He said he plays more confidently and showcases a "more relaxed" style.

"The game is all around more solid," he said. "I feel like the positioning and being in the right place and not overreacting or overplaying situations, I think that is the base for being more – I don't know – reactive in the goal and being more comfortable with the shots.

"I think coming from Europe where the ice is bigger, too, kind of getting into the smaller ice here I feel like having the better positioning and more stable game has helped me a lot."

He added: "There's not much scrambling anymore."

Granato did not have an update on Hutton. Ullmark, who suffered a lower-body injury Feb. 23, started practicing Tuesday.

The Amerks are scheduled to play the Syracuse Crunch on Friday in Rochester.

Syracuse is one of only three opponents the Amerks face this season. They also have Utica and the Cleveland Monsters on their schedule.

"You're playing ... the same three teams all over again," Luukkonen said. "That's probably been the hardest part I can pick out from this season, so preparing yourself every game even though you may be facing the same opponent (a) second or third time in a row. That's been one of the most different things compared to a normal season."

Notes: Winger Tage Thompson was a late scratch against the Penguins because of illness, so the Sabres dressed an extra defenseman, Matt Irwin. With only 11 forwards, they used different right wingers beside center Eric Staal and Victor Olofsson. ... The Sabres scratched wingers Kyle Okposo and Tobias Rieder (upper-body injuries). ... Tokarski hadn't started an NHL game since Dec. 21, 2015. ... The Sabres recalled Houser from the taxi squad prior to the game.

Sabres drop their 15th consecutive game, the longest stretch without a win in shootout era

By Matt Bove

WKBW

March 24, 2021

BUFFALO, N.Y. [WKBW] — On Wednesday night the Buffalo Sabres made the wrong kind of history. For the 15th consecutive time the Sabres failed to pick up a win, this time falling to the Pittsburgh Penguins 5-2.

With their 15h consecutive loss, the Sabres have surpassed their previous franchise record of 14 games without a win set back in 2014-2015.

In-Depth discussion: local physicians push to have students return to school five days per week

The Sabres current stretch without a win is the longest in the NHL since 2014 and is the most consecutive games without a win since the NHL introduced the shootout.

With the loss the Sabres fall to 6-21-4 on the season and have gone more than a month since their last win [Feb. 23 vs. NJ].

The Sabres will take on the Penguins once again Thursday at 7:00 p.m.

Sabres lose franchise record 15-straight games

By Paul Stockman

WIVB

March 24, 2021

PITTSBURGH (WIVB) – Buffalo broke a franchise record on Wednesday night, and not the kind they wanted to break. They lost 5-2 to the Pittsburgh Penguins, bringing their winless streak to 15 straight, the most in team history.

"I don't think we play very smart," defenseman Rasmus Ristolainen said. "We make really stupid mistakes that leads to way too many odd man rushes every game and a team like Pittsburgh, they have skill up front, and they had way too many odd man rushes and yeah I think that we should keep it very simple. We can't lose so many pucks on the blue lines or in the neutral zone and we should get the pucks deep and keep it way more simple."

Once again the second period proved to be too much for the Sabres. They gave up two goals in 2:07 to fall behind 4-1, a hole that proved too big to climb out.

"It's on us. It's on us to right the ship here," Curtis Lazar said.

Pittsburgh took a 2-0 lead on goals from Evan Rodrigues and Kris Letang. The Sabres were able to respond with a goal from Rasmus Dahlin.

Then in the second, they gave up the two goals mentioned earlier. That put them down 4-1. Pittsburgh added another in the third to make it 5-1. A penalty shot goal from Victor Olofsson was all the Sabres could get to lower the deficit.

"We're working hard," forward Victor Oloffson said. "We want it too much. Sometimes we dive into a play where we shouldn't, etc. but obviously it's tough. We're doing everything we can, we've just got to keep working."

Buffalo is 0-13-2 in these 15 games. This is also the longest stretch without a win in the NHL since the league began using shootouts in the 2005-06 season.

Luukkonen: “...trying to learn as much as I can” in Buffalo

By Paul Stockman

WIVB

March 24, 2021

BUFFALO, N.Y. (WIVB) – Goaltender Ukko-Pekka Luukkonen got the call earlier this week to move from Rochester up to the Sabres’ taxi squad.

“It’s been an exciting couple of days for me,” Luukkonen said.

The Sabres prospect got the call after Carter Hutton went down with an injury against the New York Rangers on Monday. Buffalo needed to have a goaltender on the taxi squad since Dustin Tokarski and Michael Houser moved to the active roster with Hutton and Linus Ullmark both injured.

It’s unknown if Luukkonen will even get to play during his time in Buffalo, as the Sabres could just use him to fill the roster spot until Ullmark’s return to the lineup. Still, while he’s here, Luukkonen is soaking up all he can to improve his game.

“It will be a great experience to get to be here,” Luukkonen said. “There’s a lot of great players here, all the coaching staff is really good and there’s a lot to learn from them.”

Ullmark returned to the ice earlier this week to practice with the team. His status for the next few games is still uncertain, but Luukkonen is enjoying the time with the Sabres’ goalie.

“Of course, seeing Linus back on the ice too, there’s a lot to learn from him, too, so I will just try to focus on those things and the things that they tell me to do so as I said there’s going to be a lot to learn from here,” Luukkonen said.

Luukkonen spent time playing in Finland while waiting for the AHL season to begin, and he said that experience helped him. Now that he’s back, he can learn even more from the guys around him.

“Being back in a professional environment you learn from the older guys and become more professional and you know how to be a better goalie and a better player all around,” Luukkonen said.

For now, Luukkonen’s on the taxi squad, but this experience could help him get even better as he hopes for an NHL career down the road.

The Sabres next play the Pittsburgh Penguins Wednesday night at 8 p.m.

Sabres set shootout-era record with 15th straight loss against Penguins

By Wes Crosby

NHL.com

March 25, 2021

PITTSBURGH -- The Buffalo Sabres set a shootout-era record with a 15th straight loss, 5-2 against the Pittsburgh Penguins at PPG Paints Arena on Wednesday.

Buffalo is 0-13-2 since Feb. 25, the longest stretch without a win since the NHL implemented the shootout in 2005-06, ending tie games. The 2009-10 Carolina Hurricanes, 2010-11 New York Islanders and 2014-15 Sabres each lost 14 consecutive games.

"I guess anybody's confidence would be affected with the scenario," Buffalo coach Don Granato said. "They did continue to push through to the end. They skated hard, so there's no question everybody's confidence goes up and down."

Sidney Crosby and Zach Aston-Reese each had a goal and an assist for the Penguins (20-11-2), who lost three of their previous four after a six-game winning streak. Tristan Jarry made 26 saves.

Pittsburgh scored six goals total in its previous three games.

"We were just trying to stay in the moment," Penguins coach Mike Sullivan said. "We felt like we were playing a pretty solid game, and Buffalo was competing hard against us. It's just one of those situations where you try to focus in the now and not let your mind go to those types of places. We weren't really concerned.

"The dialogue on the bench was positive. Guys felt like they were generating scoring chances, and we were just trying to stay with it and score some goals."

Dustin Tokarski made 37 saves for the Sabres (6-21-4). It was his first NHL start since Dec. 21, 2015.

The teams play here again Thursday.

"Frustration has to be the first and the foremost [feeling]," Buffalo forward Curtis Lazar said. "As a team and as a whole, we have to understand playing skill-based hockey when you're in a slump is not going to cut it. ... It's on us. It's on us to right the ship here."

Evan Rodrigues tapped in a pass from Sam Lafferty near the right post to give the Penguins a 1-0 lead at 7:36 of the first period.

Rodrigues has scored twice in six games after an eight-game goal drought.

"I think guys just kind of take advantage of extra ice time, extra opportunity, and do the most they can to help the team win," Rodrigues said. "We obviously have a great leader (Crosby), and everyone follows his example."

Kris Letang made it 2-0 at 15:44 with a wrist shot, set up by a pass from Crosby that went off Sabres defenseman Colin Miller's stick.

Rasmus Dahlin cut it to 2-1 with his first goal in 21 games, a one-timer from the point at 17:17.

The Penguins outshot the Sabres 21-12 in the first period.

"We have to get back to the basics," Lazar said. " ... Build a game, make the other team earn every chance they get. Right now, we're making it too easy."

John Marino scored on a one-timer from the right face-off circle to make it 3-1 at 17:29 of the second period. Aston-Reese made it 4-1 on a shorthanded breakaway at 19:36.

"I think we're being aggressive when the opportunity presents itself," Aston-Reese said. "Whenever you get the puck on the run, we're being aggressive."

Crosby scored on a breakaway for a 5-1 lead at 3:57 of the third period.

Victor Olofsson scored on a penalty shot at 14:35 for the 5-2 final.

The New Jersey Devils are the only team the Sabres have defeated since Jan. 28. They are 3-2-1 against the Devils and 0-16-2 against the rest of the MassMutual East Division in that span.

Buffalo is 0-3-0 and has been outscored 14-6 since Ralph Krueger was fired as coach March 17.

"It's tough. Obviously, we want to win," Olofsson said. "Everyone's working hard. We're not working smart all of the time. We're working hard. ... Sometimes [we] dive into a play where we shouldn't. But obviously, it's tough."

NOTES: The Winnipeg Jets hold the NHL record for most consecutive games without a win; they played 30 straight without a victory (0-23 with seven ties) from Oct. 19-Dec. 20, 1980. ... Penguins forward Kasper Kapanen is being evaluated for a lower-body injury after he took a puck off his ankle in the second period. ... Sabres forward Tage Thompson was out because of an illness. ... Sabres forward Rasmus Asplund did not play after the first period because of an undisclosed injury, leaving them with 10 forwards for the rest of the game. ... Crosby had his 387th multipoint game in the NHL. Toronto Maple Leafs forward Joe Thornton is the only active player with more (391).

Penguins push Sabres' losing streak to 15 games, worst of NHL shootout era

By James O'Brien

NBC Sports

March 24, 2021

On Wednesday, the Buffalo Sabres weren't always as bad as the 5-2 loss against the Penguins indicates. Even so, the Sabres are now on a 15-game losing (and/or "winless") streak thanks to a mixture of bad luck, structural flaws, and sheer incompetence.

It's not just one thing, but moral victories don't matter when you keep losing like this.

The Penguins improved to 20-11-2, while the Sabres sank to 6-21-4.

Perhaps not always as bad as it looks ... but still bad

Through the first period, things were fairly clinical. The Penguins built a 2-1 lead, generating a 21-12 shots on goal advantage. A sneaky-good Penguins defense and goaltending didn't necessarily need to do much vs. the Sabres on Wednesday.

The Penguins really exaggerated the already-legitimate issues for the Sabres during the second period.

If you want to look at turning points, consider Rasmus Dahlin's night, in general.

During the first period, Dahlin gave the Sabres a measure of hope with a goal. The middle frame brought the pain, however — both literally and figuratively.

Bringing in injuries and insults, officials missed a high stick that bloodied Dahlin's nose. Considering all the controversy surrounding the Tim Peel/"hot mic" officiating scandal, people jumped on that mistake.

Then, after that, the Penguins jumped on Sabres mistakes to really put this one out of reach, and sometimes Dahlin was helpless to stop them.

Ouch.

Taylor Hall received more grief than Dahlin on Wednesday, but they both are frustrated players on a (historically) losing team, and Dahlin's the one who got bloodied in the process. Can't be fun.

After the Penguins went up 4-1 to end the second, it was pretty much a write-off from there. Sidney Crosby had enough room to score a pretty, if redundant, third-period goal.

From the Penguins' perspective, beating the lowly Sabres is taking care of business. It's worth keeping an eye on Kasper Kapanen, though, as he suffered through bumps and bruises in this one.

Perspective on Penguins pushing Sabres' losing streak to 15 games

Between losing streaks and "winless" streaks, the Buffalo Sabres going 0-13-2 for 15 straight losses puts them in rare company.

Consider some of this perspective on the Sabres' 15-game losing streak. For one thing, it's now the longest of the shootout era.

LONGEST SINGLE-SEASON LOSING STREAKS

SHOOTOUT ERA (SINCE 2005-06)

BUFFALO SABRES – 15 GAMES – ACTIVE (2020-21)

BUFFALO SABRES – 14 GAMES – 2014-15

NEW YORK ISLANDERS – 14 GAMES – 2010-11

CAROLINA HURRICANES – 14 GAMES – 2009-10

Once you move beyond the shootout era, you also factor in the possibility of ties. So, looking at the Sabres' 0-13-2 as a 15-game "winless" streak, here is where that doomed run compares to other winless streaks since 2000-01.

As you can see, the 2020-21 Sabres' 15-game winless streak leaves them in a three-way tie for third-worst.

LONGEST SINGLE-SEASON WINLESS STREAKS

SINCE 2000-01

2003-04 PENGUINS: 18 GAMES

2002-03 PENGUINS: 16 GAMES

2003-04 COYOTES: 15 GAMES

2002-03 PREDATORS: 15 GAMES

2020-21 SABRES: 15 GAMES

6 OTHER TEAMS ARE TIED AT 14 GAMES

Interestingly, the 2020-21 Penguins will play a role in whether or not these Sabres will see their winless streak tie the 2002-03 Penguins at 16 games. The Sabres and Penguins won't get much time to contemplate such historic specifics, either. They'll turn around and face each other on Thursday to close off this back-to-back set.

Everything That Could Go Wrong For The Buffalo Sabres Has Gone Wrong

By Neil Paine

Five Thirty Eight

March 24, 2021

This was supposed to be the year things finally started turning around for the Buffalo Sabres. After missing the playoffs for almost the entirety of the 2010s — the franchise's last postseason appearances were a pair of first-round losses in 2010 and 2011 — Buffalo was looking to build on the improvements it made in 2020 and launch a legitimate playoff bid in 2021. Enlisted to help in that pursuit: future Hall of Famer center Eric Staal,¹ acquired via trade last September, and former MVP left wing Taylor Hall, who signed a one-year deal in October. Add in the emerging talent of franchise center Jack Eichel, who had 78 points (and 36 goals) in 68 games as a 23-year-old, and the Sabres were a team on the rise. So what could go wrong in Buffalo's ascent?

As it turns out, basically everything. From an early season COVID-19 outbreak that sidelined nine players (plus then-coach Ralph Krueger) and may have been caused by on-ice viral spread from the New Jersey Devils, to the benching of left wing Jeff Skinner (the team's second-highest paid player), rampant trade rumors, the inability to recall players from the AHL for a time (also due to COVID-19), Krueger's eventual firing, Hall's struggles to score (two goals in 30 games) and a recent long-term injury to Eichel, Buffalo has endured one of the most challenging campaigns by any team in recent memory ... and it's only slightly more than halfway over. After losing to the New York Rangers on Monday night, the Sabres have now lost 14 games in a row, giving them one of the 12 longest single-season losing streaks in NHL history — and both of the league's last two 14-game streaks.

The Sabres are on a historic skid

Longest single-season losing streaks in NHL history, since 1917-18

SEASON	TEAM	RANGE OF GAME NOS.	LOSING STREAK
2003-04	Pittsburgh Penguins	45-62	18
1992-93	San Jose Sharks	40-56	17
1974-75	Washington Capitals	59-75	17
1930-31	Philadelphia Quakers	7-21	15
2020-21	Buffalo Sabres*	17-30	14
2014-15	Buffalo Sabres	37-50	14
2010-11	New York Islanders	8-21	14
2009-10	Carolina Hurricanes	5-18	14
1992-93	Ottawa Senators	67-80	14
1990-91	Quebec Nordiques	10-23	14
1981-82	Detroit Red Wings	63-76	14
1975-76	Kansas City Scouts	37-50	14

*Active streak.

Streaks were not included if they spanned multiple seasons or were interrupted by ties (which still gave a team points in the NHL standings).

SOURCE: HOCKEY-REFERENCE.COM

All of this continues what has secretly been one of the most brutal recent stretches in major North American men's pro sports. The Sabres currently have an Elo rating of 1411, which recently dipped beneath the Ottawa Senators for second-worst in the NHL (ahead of only the Detroit Red Wings and their deep rebuilding project). And at least those teams have been competitive somewhat recently. The last time Ottawa's Elo was over 1500 — or league average — was on Dec. 1, 2017, early in the season that followed the Sens' narrow loss in the Eastern Conference finals to the Pittsburgh Penguins. The Red Wings haven't been an average team for slightly longer; they last surpassed a 1500 Elo on Nov. 2, 2016, as their playoff empire was beginning to crumble. But the last time the Sabres cracked league average was more than three years and nine months before that — on Jan. 31, 2013. Ever since, over a span of 632 games (or eight years, one month and 23 days), the Sabres have been solidly below average at best.

No other major men's pro team, in the NHL or beyond, can compete with Buffalo's ongoing streak of subpar play. Major League Baseball's longest current below-average Elo drought belongs to the Detroit Tigers and extends back to Aug. 5, 2017. In the NFL, the New York Jets haven't carried an above-average Elo since Sept. 25, 2016.

And over in the NBA, even the long-suffering Knicks can't hold a candle to the Sabres' run; New York's last above-average game was on Nov. 4, 2014, a full 643 days after Buffalo's streak began. (The Knicks have also flirted with 1500 just this very season, coming within 5 points of that mark as recently as March 23. They are much, much closer to average right now than their in-state hockey counterparts.)

The Sabres are in a bad league of their own

For teams in the "Big Four" North American men's pro leagues, longest active droughts since finishing a game with an Elo rating of 1500 or higher

TEAM	LEAGUE	DATE OF LAST 1500+ ELO GAME
Buffalo Sabres	NHL	Jan. 31, 2013
New York Knicks	NBA	Nov. 4, 2014
New York Jets	NFL	Sept. 25, 2016
Detroit Red Wings	NHL	Nov. 2, 2016
Chicago Bulls	NBA	April 26, 2017
Detroit Tigers	MLB	Aug. 5, 2017
Kansas City Royals	MLB	Aug. 26, 2017
Miami Marlins	MLB	Aug. 28, 2017
New York Giants	NFL	Sept. 10, 2017
Baltimore Orioles	MLB	Sept. 19, 2017
Ottawa Senators	NHL	Dec. 1, 2017
Washington Wizards	NBA	April 25, 2018
Jacksonville Jaguars	NFL	Oct. 14, 2018
Los Angeles Kings	NHL	Oct. 15, 2018
New Jersey Devils	NHL	Oct. 16, 2018

An Elo of 1500 is designed to represent a roughly average team.

SOURCE: SPORTS-REFERENCE.COM

In a salary-capped sport such as the NHL, long stretches of noncompetitive performance are supposed to be nearly impossible. That's particularly true when a team snags an elite prospect like Buffalo did with Eichel, who has been more than merely the consolation prize behind fellow 2015 draftee and current Best Player in the NHL Connor McDavid. But while rebuilding after a relatively successful decade in the 2000s, the Sabres didn't manage to accumulate much else around Eichel in the 2010s. In the drafts since Buffalo's last playoff appearance (in 2011) for which we can measure five-year value relative to expectation using goals above replacement (GAR),² only the Dallas Stars and New York Islanders got less immediate value from their draftees (relative to where they were picked) than the Sabres. This is despite Buffalo owning the second-most-valuable set of draft picks (behind Edmonton) and Eichel being one of the more successful picks of that span, having exceeded expectations by 30.7 adjusted GAR over his first five seasons.

Hockey's best- (and worst-) drafting teams

NHL teams whose draftees produced the most and fewest goals above replacement (GAR) relative to expectation in the first five seasons after being drafted, 2011-16 drafts

Best drafts:	5-YEAR GAR VALUE				
	TEAM	PICKS	EXPECTED	ACTUAL	DIFF.
	Boston Bruins	39	116.5	229.6	+113.1
	Anaheim Ducks	38	110.6	196.9	+86.3
	Calgary Flames	40	147.1	233.2	+86.1
	Tampa Bay Lightning	46	136.7	213.7	+77.0
	Winnipeg Jets	44	167.2	242.1	+74.9

Worst drafts:	5-YEAR GAR VALUE				
	TEAM	PICKS	EXPECTED	ACTUAL	DIFF.
	Dallas Stars	44	122.9	47.3	-75.6
	New York Islanders	42	153.9	92.5	-61.4
	Buffalo Sabres	50	216.4	177.5	-38.9
	Florida Panthers	44	203.8	168.1	-35.7
	Ottawa Senators	42	125.4	91.0	-34.4

Expected GAR is based on the long-term history of players taken at each pick slot.

SOURCE: HOCKEY-REFERENCE.COM

The draft isn't everything, of course. For example, the Stars, Islanders and Panthers have found recent success despite a low ranking on the list above, through a combination of savvy acquisitions and patience with their late bloomers. But the Sabres have mostly struggled to replicate that formula.

In 2019-20, when the Sabres showed signs of improvement, the team's six most valuable players, by adjusted GAR, had all made their NHL debuts with Buffalo — and only 9 percent of total team value came from newcomers, well below the NHL average of 15 percent that season — underscoring the Sabres' reliance on developing talent despite a mediocre track record in the draft. But that plan falls apart when your homegrown core stalls out, as has happened in Buffalo this season. While Eichel's possession numbers were fine before his injury, his overall production — just two goals and 16 assists in 21 games, with a -9 rating and 5.1 adjusted GAR — was way down from his borderline MVP-caliber 20.3 adjusted-GAR showing in 2020. (His 0.25 goals created per game in 2021 is tracking for a new career low.) That has also been true for most of his fellow homegrown products, including Sam Reinhart (7.4 adjusted GAR, down from 8.7 last year), Rasmus Ristolainen (3.0 versus 8.8 in 2020) and especially Rasmus Dahlin (-0.2 versus 9.9 in 2020). Overall, Sabres holdovers from 2020 are on pace to decline by 53 net goals in 2021 (by GAR per 82 games), relative to a year ago. Only returnees to the Philadelphia Flyers and Columbus Blue Jackets have regressed more this season.

And when Buffalo has ventured outside the organization to acquire new talent from other teams, the results have been almost uniformly disappointing. Hall and Staal are just the latest examples; both had solid 2020 campaigns and were outstanding as recently as 2018, but they've contributed very little this season, and each is firmly on the trade block. Before them, however, there were Skinner and Kyle Okposo, Evander Kane, Matt Moulson, Brian Gionta, Andrej Meszároš, Christian Ehrhoff and Ville Leino (just to name a few). All carried sizable cap hits, and none came remotely close to matching their track records with previous teams. Just this year, Skinner, Hall, Okposo and Staal are eating up 32.7 percent of Buffalo's salary cap while generating a combined -2.7 adjusted GAR.

With Eichel out and so many of his teammates missing the mark, it's no wonder the Sabres are so lousy right now. (And it's no wonder that Krueger had to go as head coach.) The real question is what's next. Although Eichel reportedly is not looking for a trade out of Buffalo — and the Sabres would be fools to deal away a 24-year-old whose most similar retired comparables are Bernie Geoffrion, Owen Nolan, Bobby Hull and Rick Nash — the team is generally open for trade-deadline business. However, this year's deadline, which would normally carry at least some future promise for a clearly rebuilding team such as the Sabres, comes with unique complications — such as mandatory 14-day quarantines for players dealt to Canadian teams, and a leaguewide salary cap squeeze — that could depress the trade market for Buffalo's more alluring rental targets. With a lot of salary coming off the books next offseason, the Sabres would have figured to be active sellers, but it remains to be seen how much activity this strange deadline will actually see.

Beyond the nuts-and-bolts mechanics of another rebuilding cycle, though, Buffalo badly needs to change the culture of losing that sets in when a team hasn't been above average in more than eight years. The 2021 Sabres were supposed to do that ... but instead they just deepened the franchise's woes. For now, the best Buffalo can hope for is to survive this Murphy's law season and move on to something less snakebit in the future.

5 takeaways | Turnovers prove costly in loss to Pens

By Jourdon LaBarber

Sabres.com

March 25, 2021

Rasmus Ristolainen seemed to capture the prevailing sentiment of Buffalo Sabres players following a 5-2 loss to the Pittsburgh Penguins on Wednesday.

Ending what has become a franchise-record, 15-game winless streak will be a matter of working smarter, not harder.

"I don't think we play very smart," Ristolainen said. "We make really stupid mistakes that lead to way too many odd-man rushes every game, and a team like Pittsburgh, they have skill up front and they had way too many odd-man rushes. I think we should keep it very simple."

Evan Rodrigues opened the scoring for the Penguins on a 3-on-2 rush, one of eight shots he would record on the night and one of 20 the Penguins would tally during the first period. The play began at the opposite end, when Rasmus Dahlin pinched in the offensive zone with no forwards dropping back to cover. Turnovers paved the way for Penguins goals for the remainder of the night.

Dahlin scored one of two goals for the Sabres on a shot from the point late in the first period. Victor Olofsson added another on a penalty shot during the third.

Here are five takeaways from the game.

1. Turnovers reappear late

Dahlin's goal sent the Sabres into the first intermission with a manageable 2-1 deficit. That score held throughout most of the second period, during which interim head coach Don Granato felt his team gained control of its game.

That changed during the final three minutes, beginning when an errant breakout pass from Taylor Hall led to an extended shift in the Buffalo zone that ended with a goal from John Marino. A misplay between Hall and Dahlin at the offensive blue line turned into a shorthanded goal for Zach Aston-Reese, increasing the deficit to 4-1 with 23.9 seconds left in the period.

Sidney Crosby got behind the Buffalo defense on a rush to extend the lead early in the third.

"I think we got to play a little bit smarter," Olofsson said. "We're working hard but maybe not as efficient as we want to. Just got to be a little bit more calm out there and read the play a little bit better. I think that will go a long way."

Curtis Lazar echoed Ristolainen's call for simplicity.

"We've got to understand that playing skill-based hockey when you're in a slump, it's not going to cut it," Lazar said. "We have to get back to the basics and really just will our way to a win. Build a game, make the other team earn every chance they get. Right now, we're making it too easy."

2. Learning on the fly

Granato has been asking the Sabres to play with more pace since taking over in his interim role a week ago. He said many of the mistakes Wednesday could be attributed to the learning curve as players adapt to a more offensive-minded approach.

"You don't have to open it up," he said. "But to play with pace and to adapt to that, it may open up until you actually understand how to not do that and not open it up. I'm generalizing here, but that's the quest for us as coaches.

"And I do believe it's part of a natural process when you're trying to move in that direction is, yes, you're going to give up some things. You'll start picking up the patterns of how to not expose yourself in those situations. So, again, not shocking to me that this is part of a process."

3. Tokarski gets the start

Dustin Tokarski was solid in his first NHL start since 2015, stopping 37 of 42 shots on a night when the Penguins were credited with 43 scoring chances, according to NaturalStatTrick.com.

"I think he's been phenomenal for us both these games," Olofsson said. "Made some really big saves for us. I think it's time for us to pay it back to him and play some better hockey."

4. Lineup notes

The Sabres announced prior to warmups that Tage Thompson would miss the game due to an illness.

"We didn't find out until right before we were coming to the rink that he wasn't feeling good so we just out of precaution said to stay at the hotel to not complicate things more," Granato said.

The team dressed seven defensemen in Thompson's absence with Tobias Rieder also out due to an injury. The forward group took another hit during the first period when Rasmus Asplund left the game following his third shift, which ended with a collision between Asplund and Bryan Rust.

"He's still being evaluated so I don't have anything definitive on him," Granato said regarding Asplund.

"Obviously, he wasn't able to return tonight so it doesn't look good for tomorrow. But I don't have a report on him."

5. Up next

The Sabres meet the Penguins again on Thursday. Coverage on MSG begins at 6:30 p.m. with puck drop set for 7.

At The Final Horn: Sabres 2 - Penguins 5

By Chris Ryndak

Sabres.com

March 24, 2021

The Buffalo Sabres' winless streak reached a franchise-record 15 games with the team's 5-2 loss to the Pittsburgh Penguins on Wednesday at PPG Paints Arena.

Rasmus Dahlin scored his first goal since January 31 and Victor Olofsson scored on a penalty shot for Buffalo. Dustin Tokarski, making his first start since December 21, 2015, stopped 37 shots.

Evan Rodrigues, Kris Letang, John Marino, Zach Aston-Reese and Sidney Crosby scored for the Penguins. Tristan Jarry made 26 saves.

Buffalo is 0-13-2 over the last 15 games. The team's last win came on February 23.

The Sabres went 0-for-3 on the power play, bringing the team to an 0-for-24 skid with the man advantage, and they also allowed a shorthanded goal. Buffalo was 5-for-5 on the penalty kill.

What happened

The Penguins kept Tokarski busy early. They opened the game with a 4-1 edge in shots. And in the first 3:30, Pittsburgh's chances also included sequences where Henri Jokiharju had to clear the puck from entering an open net and a hit crossbar.

Pittsburgh broke through 7:36 into the contest. On an odd-man rush into the Sabres zone, Sam Lafferty sent the puck over to Rodrigues on the right wing who redirected it in past Tokarski.

Letang capitalized with 4:16 left in the first to make it 2-0. Crosby threw a puck in front of the net and it ricocheted right to Letang, who potted it.

Then off a faceoff with 2:43 remaining in the first period, Dahlin's quick slap shot from the point made its way through traffic and past Jarry, putting Buffalo within one.

Pittsburgh extended its lead to 3-1 when Marino's point shot beat Tokarski with 2:31 left in the second. Colton Sceviour set up a successful screen.

The Penguins scored one more time before the end of the second period, this time while shorthanded. Frederick Gaudreau picked off a Sabres pass at their own blue line and then skated in on a breakaway before being cut off by Dahlin and Taylor Hall. Gaudreau slowed down, cut to his right and then dropped the puck off to his trailer in Aston-Reese, who got his stick in a shooting lane for an easy goal with 23.9 seconds remaining.

After two periods, Pittsburgh was outshooting Buffalo 34-18.

Crosby added Pittsburgh's fifth goal while on a breakaway during 4-on-4 play, wristing in an on-edge puck 3:57 into the third.

Olofsson converted on his penalty shot with 5:25 left.

The goal marked Buffalo's first successful penalty shot attempt since Jack Eichel scored on Edmonton's Mike Smith on January 2, 2020.

Roll the highlight film

Watch the penalty shot goal here:

Worth mentioning

Before pregame warmups, the Sabres announced that forward Tage Thompson would miss the game due to an illness. Buffalo skated with seven defensemen.

Rasmus Asplund left the game 6:08 in with an injury and did not return.

Tobias Rieder and Carter Hutton were also scratched due to injury. Kyle Okposo was placed on injured reserve. He is not on the trip with the team.

Coming up

The back-to-back set concludes tomorrow night when the Sabres and Penguins face off again at PPG Paints Arena. Faceoff is set for 7 p.m. on MSG and WGR 550 with pregame coverage on MSG starting at 6:30.

Sabres recall Houser from taxi squad

By Chris Ryndak

Sabres.com

March 24, 2021

The Buffalo Sabres have recalled goaltender Michael Houser from the taxi squad.

Houser, 28, joined the organization in 2018-19 when he signed an AHL deal with the Rochester Americans and has primarily manned the net for the Sabres' ECHL affiliate, the Cincinnati Cyclones.

He signed an NHL contract for the remainder of this season last Friday.

Last season in Cincinnati, he posted a 16-5-5 record in 26 games. In 2018-19, he was the ECHL Goaltender of the Year and an All-ECHL First Team selection.

He has yet to appear in an NHL game.

Buffalo faces the Pittsburgh Penguins tonight from PPG Paints Arena at 8 p.m. Watch the game on NBCSN or listen to Dan Dunleavy and Rob Ray call the action on WGR 550.

Dustin Tokarski will be in goal for Buffalo, marking his first NHL start since December 21, 2015. Carter Hutton is back in Buffalo for further evaluation of a lower-body injury sustained on Monday. Linus Ullmark has been out since February 25 with a lower-body injury and returned to practice with the team yesterday. Ukko-Pekka Luukkonen, who has started eight games for the Rochester Americans, was called up to the taxi squad on Tuesday.

'I'm just trying to learn' | Luukkonen hopes to benefit on taxi squad

By Jourdon LaBarber

Sabres.com

March 24, 2021

Ukko-Pekka Luukkonen may not appear in a game during his current stint with the Buffalo Sabres, an assignment necessitated by injuries to both Linus Ullmark and Carter Hutton.

Sabres interim coach Don Granato still expects it to be an invaluable experience for the 22-year-old goaltender.

"Every moment you're with the NHL team is big," Granato said. "... You have to acclimate and feel that you belong and take ownership of being at that level, and when you do, those players flourish, they play to their actual potential at that time.

"So, confidence is an enormous part of it, that self-projection. The more time a prospect can get around it, the easier it becomes for them to associate, 'Yes, I belong here.' It moves from a dream to a reality for every player in that regard. So, it's a big moment."

Luukkonen was watching on TV when Hutton sustained his injury against the New York Rangers on Monday. With Ullmark still on injured reserve, the loss of Hutton left Dustin Tokarski and Michael Houser as Buffalo's two healthy goaltenders.

Teams are required to carry at least one goaltender on the taxi squad this season, prompting Luukkonen to get the call on Tuesday.

Luukkonen has had a promising trajectory since being selected by the Sabres during the second round of the 2017 NHL Draft. He turned heads upon joining the Sudbury Wolves of the Ontario Hockey League for his first North American season in 2018-19, rewriting the team's record books while capturing the Red Tilson Trophy as the league's most outstanding player. He won a gold medal with Finland at the World Junior Championship that January, icing on the cake for a storybook year.

The Sabres have since taken their time with Luukkonen's development. He spent the majority of last season with the organization's ECHL affiliate, the Cincinnati Cyclones, where he posted a .912 save percentage in 23 games and earned a spot in the league's All-Star Game. His results in 10 games at the AHL level with Rochester were less dazzling - 3-4-4 with a .874 save percentage - but proved to be valuable. Luukkonen began this season with TPS of Finland's top pro league and has since returned to Rochester a more comfortable, confident goalie.

Luukkonen has started eight of 10 games for the Amerks this season, going 5-2-1 with a .904 save percentage.

"The game is all-around more solid," he said. "I feel like the positioning and being in the right place and not overreacting or overplaying situations, I think that is the base for being more - I don't know - reactive in the goal and being more comfortable with the shots."

Tokarski is expected to start for the Sabres against the Penguins on Wednesday with Houser as his backup. Granato has not set a target date for Ullmark to return to the lineup, though the goaltender did practice with the team on Tuesday.

Whatever awaits him, Luukkonen said he hopes to make the most of the time he has while sharing the ice with Ullmark and assistant coach Mike Bales.

"I'm just trying to learn as much as I can here," he said.

Tokarski to start as Sabres open back-to-back set in Pittsburgh

By Jourdon LaBarber

Sabres.com

March 24, 2021

Don Granato said he has seen signs of a turning tide in the Buffalo Sabres' approach since taking over as interim head coach last Wednesday.

The Sabres erased a 3-1 deficit early during the third period of their game against the New York Rangers on Monday, but a power-play goal against and an empty netter resulted in a 5-3 loss.

Buffalo gets another chance to snap its 14-game winless streak (0-12-2) when it opens a back-to-back set in Pittsburgh on Wednesday night.

"We'll get to the other side," Granato said. "I believe our guys are in a good mindset with respect to that. I also believe they're tactically dialed in on things that can bring consistency and more control to them individually and collectively as a group. They're identifying with things that can really push them out of this but also give them foundational confidence to win on a more consistent basis.

"And when I say win - win little battles, win situations. Eventually those things add up to winning games. I do feel the direction that we wanted to establish and build from ... is going the way it needs to go. Everything is a process, but I do believe that's there. Each game is an evaluation of where you're at. What do you do next? That's how we take tonight."

Dustin Tokarski will make his first NHL start since Dec. 21, 2015 and is expected to be backed up by Michael Houser. Tokarski entered the game on Monday following an early injury to goaltender Carter Hutton and stopped 33 of 37 shots. Hutton has since traveled back to Buffalo for further evaluations.

Houser, 28, has never appeared in an NHL game. He spent the past two seasons with Buffalo's ECHL affiliate, the Cincinnati Cyclones.

Scouting the Penguins

Pittsburgh has had two days to recover following a stretch of five games over seven days that concluded with an overtime loss to New Jersey on Sunday. Forwards Evgeni Malkin, Teddy Blueger, and Brandon Tanev all sustained injuries during that run and will be out on Wednesday.

The line of Jake Guentzel, Sidney Crosby, and Bryan Rust has driven the offense during Malkin's three-game absence, accounting for five of Pittsburgh's six goals in that span. Pittsburgh is 1-1-1 in those contests.

Tristan Jarry will get the nod in goal for the Penguins.

Tune in

The game will be televised nationally on NBCSN. Puck drop is scheduled for 8 p.m.

Sabres, ConnectLife team up to encourage blood donations

Sabres.com

March 24, 2021

The Buffalo Sabres are teaming up with ConnectLife to call upon Western New Yorkers to donate blood during the month of April.

All donors throughout the month will receive a Sabres-ConnectLife royal blue long sleeve shirt. There is a critical need for blood donations in our community and one blood donor can save up to three lives at Western New York hospitals.

"As our community life begins to return to normal, it's important to remember that the need for lifesaving blood donations never goes away," said Dan Misko, Pegula Sports and Entertainment's senior vice president of business development. "Our partners at ConnectLife remain committed to having blood available for all in need, and we're proud to do our part to encourage donations."

Every blood donation made with ConnectLife stays in Western New York. As the Sabres and ConnectLife team up to help tackle our community's critical need for blood donations (especially O- and O+), all donors in April will receive their long sleeve tee at the time of their blood donation.

All members of the community are encouraged to donate, whether or not they've received a COVID vaccination. Anyone who has received the vaccine remains eligible to donate immediately, with no wait-times required.

"As WNY's only community blood bank, it is our responsibility to answer the call for blood at our local hospitals," said Mark J. Simon, President & CEO of Unyts. "One year after the onset of COVID we continue to experience a destabilization of the blood supply in our region, and we are grateful for great partners like the Buffalo Sabres for helping us in this life-saving endeavor."

To make an appointment, visit CONNECTLIFEGIVEBLOOD.ORG or call 716-529-4270.

About ConnectLife

ConnectLife helps people help others. As Western New York's only community blood center and federally designated organ, eye, and tissue procurement agency, ConnectLife saves and enhances lives through the support and compassion of donors who graciously choose to give the gift of life.

About Pegula Sports & Entertainment

Pegula Sports & Entertainment (PSE) streamlines key business areas across all Pegula family-owned sports and entertainment properties including the Buffalo Bills, Buffalo Sabres, Buffalo Bandits, Rochester Americans, Rochester Knighthawks, LECOM Harborcenter and ADPRO Sports. PSE aims to be a leader in the sports and entertainment industry by bringing together the individual resources, capabilities and talents of each of its entities to create a cohesive and sustainable brand that together represents the Pegula family's interest. PSE's mission is to achieve long term success through teamwork while constantly striving for excellence and placing fans first in all that we do to ensure our brands create memorable experiences.