



# **Buffalo Sabres**

## **Daily Press Clips**

*March 29, 2021*

## **Buffalo faces Philadelphia on 10-game home slide**

Associated Press

March 28, 2021

Philadelphia Flyers (16-13-4, fifth in the East Division) vs. Buffalo Sabres (6-23-4, eighth in the East Division)

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

**BOTTOM LINE:** Buffalo takes on Philadelphia looking to break its 10-game home losing streak.

The Sabres are 6-23-4 against East Division opponents. Buffalo serves 6.3 penalty minutes per game, the fewest in the league. Jean-Sebastien Dea leads the team averaging 2.0.

The Flyers are 16-13-4 against East Division teams. Philadelphia is 10th in the league recording 8.6 points per game, averaging 3.1 goals and 5.6 assists.

In their last meeting on March 9, Philadelphia won 5-4.

**TOP PERFORMERS:** Sam Reinhart leads the Sabres with 21 points, scoring 12 goals and adding nine assists. Brandon Montour has four assists over the last 10 games for Buffalo.

James van Riemsdyk leads the Flyers with 31 points, scoring 13 goals and adding 18 assists. Jakub Voracek has two goals and seven assists over the last 10 games for Philadelphia.

**LAST 10 GAMES:** Sabres: 0-9-1, averaging 1.6 goals, 2.5 assists, 3.9 penalties and 8.9 penalty minutes while giving up 3.7 goals per game with an .889 save percentage.

Flyers: 3-6-1, averaging 2.6 goals, 4.6 assists, 3.9 penalties and 10.6 penalty minutes while allowing 4.6 goals per game with an .815 save percentage.

**INJURIES:** Sabres: Carter Hutton: day to day (undisclosed), Jake McCabe: out (knee), Will Borgen: out (forearm), Jack Eichel: out (upper body), Tage Thompson: day to day (illness).

Flyers: None listed.

## **Bruins win 3-2 to extend Sabres skid to 17 straight losses**

By Jimmy Golen

Associated Press

March 27, 2021

BOSTON (AP) — The Buffalo Sabres lost their 17th consecutive game on Saturday, twice blowing a one-goal lead before Craig Smith scored with 3:50 left to snap a third-period tie and give the Boston Bruins a 3-2 victory.

The Sabres have not won since Feb. 23, tying the 18th longest losing streak in NHL history. It was just the fifth time during that span that they have managed to come within one goal.

"There's nothing to say about that now," said Sabres goalie Linus Ullmark, who was activated Saturday after a month on injured reserve and made 33 saves. "You've got to go home, recharge and come back stronger for the next one."

Matt Grzelcyk and Nick Ritchie each had a goal and an assist, and third-stringer Daniel Vladar stopped 25 shots for Boston, which beat Buffalo for the seventh time in a row. It was the Bruins' first victory in front of their home fans since March, 2020; the state of Massachusetts opened large arenas to fans at 12% capacity as of Tuesday.

Sam Reinhart and Kyle Okposo scored for Buffalo, each time giving the Sabres the lead. But Boston came back twice and took its first lead of the game when Smith came up with the puck after a scramble and knocked in the game-winner.

The Sabres pulled the goalie in the final two minutes, but gave up the advantage when Rasmus Ristolainen was called for goalie interference with 25 seconds left.

"I did not feel a panic out of the players at all," said interim Buffalo coach Don Granato, who took over March 17 when Ralph Krueger was fired. "There was none of that. I didn't feel like we tightened up. I didn't feel the panic, but I didn't feel enough assertive energy, I didn't feel enough take-charge leadership."

Ullmark, who was injured in the first game of the losing streak on Feb. 25, said he spent his time away trying not to think about his teammates' struggles.

"There's nothing that I can do to control it," he said. "I got my mind off of it as much as possible. When you're in it, you want to get in there and help the boys out. But I couldn't."

Vladar, playing in just his third NHL game, started poorly with a giveaway behind his net during a Buffalo power play just two minutes in. Reinhart intercepted the pass and slid it into the net before the goalie could get back in position.

Grzelcyk tied it midway through the second on a shot from the blue line. But Buffalo was back in front less than three minutes later when Okposo beat a Bruin to a rebound to the left of the goal and chipped it into the net.

Six minutes into the third, Charlie McAvoy made a complete circle around the net and then some before sending a centering pass off Buffalo defenseman Ristolainen's skate. It bounced to Ritchie, who swiped it in to tie the game 2-2.

"It might sound dumb, but I'm not thinking — not overthinking I should say. Just trying to find space and make a play," McAvoy said. "I'm just playing off my instincts. The game comes easier when I have my feet moving."

The Sabres have been without Jack Eichel since early March and had been forced to use a fourth-string goalie, Dustin Tokarski before Ullmark returned on Saturday. Okposo missed three games with an injury.

But at least they got Granato back. The interim coach was placed in the NHL's COVID-19 protocols along with assistant Matt Ellis hours before the opening faceoff on Thursday, forcing general manager Kevyn Adams to man the bench against Pittsburgh.

UP NEXT

Buffalo: Hosts Philadelphia on Monday.

Boston: Hosts New Jersey on Sunday.

## **Sabres begin overhaul by trading Eric Staal to Canadiens**

By John Wawrow

Associated Press

March 26, 2021

**BUFFALO, N.Y. (AP)** — The Buffalo Sabres' overhaul has begun, with the spiraling team trading veteran center Eric Staal to the Montreal Canadiens on Friday.

Buffalo acquired the Canadiens' third and fifth-round selections in the 2021 draft. The Sabres also agreed to retain \$1,625,000, which represents half of the final year of Staal's salary.

"The professionalism Eric displayed during his time with the Sabres was felt by everybody in our organization from top to bottom," first-year Sabres general manager Kevyn Adams said. "I know his leadership and demeanor were valued by our players, coaches and staff, and Eric's impact on our young players is obvious."

Staal is a 17-year veteran, who can provide the Canadiens a late-season boost to their playoff hopes. Staal won't be able to join the team immediately because he will have to first quarantine under Canadian health regulations for those traveling from outside the country.

Unlike other players joining a team north of the border this season, Staal will only need to quarantine for seven days — not 14 — after the Canadian government approved an exception for NHL players traded from U.S. teams. Staal will be subject to daily virus testing during his quarantine and will could play for the Canadiens as soon as April 3 or 5.

Montreal is 2-2-2 in its past six and 14-8-9 overall. With 37 points, the Canadiens sit fourth in the North Division, two ahead of Vancouver and four up on Calgary.

The Sabres, by comparison, are in sell-off mode.

The move comes a day after the Sabres extended their franchise-worst winless skid to 16 games with a 4-0 loss at Pittsburgh. Buffalo, which plays at Boston on Saturday, is 0-14-2 in its past 16, which marks the NHL's longest streak since the Penguins went 0-17-1 during the 2003-04 season.

The Sabres have a league-low six wins and been shut out seven times this season, while all but mathematically in position to extend their playoff drought to a NHL record-matching 10th season.

Staal is expected to be but the first of several Sabres players on the move before the NHL's trade deadline on April 12.

Forward Taylor Hall, signed in October to a one-year, \$8 million contract, acknowledged following the loss at Pittsburgh that he would be open to waiving his no-trade clause. Others on the trade block include defensemen Brandon Montour and Colin Miller.

The Sabres were informed of Staal being traded following practice in Boston, forward Kyle Okposo said.

"We just got off the ice to go wish him well. He's a character guy," Okposo said, while acknowledging more moves are likely coming. "It's pretty obvious. I mean, nobody's naive here. Everybody knows what's going on with the situation that we're in."

Buffalo acquired the 36-year-old Staal in a trade that sent forward Marcus Johansson to Minnesota in September. It was the first trade completed by Sabres GM Kevyn Adams, who took over after Jason Botterill was fired in June.

Adams was teammates with Staal on the Carolina Hurricanes' 2006 Stanley Cup championship team. Staal was targeted to address Buffalo's need for a second-line center, and added experienced leadership to a team with a reputation of being fragile.

A 12-time 20 goal scorer, who scored 42 as recently as the 2017-18 season in Minnesota, Staal has managed just three goals and 10 points in 32 games, and hasn't scored in his past 23.

Staal's 439 career goals rank fifth among active players, and 68th overall, after moving ahead of Pavel Bure, Gary Roberts and Rick Nash this season. His 1,031 career points rank seventh among active players and 80th overall, one short of matching former Sabres star Alexander Mogilny.

Selected by Carolina with the No. 2 pick in the 2003 draft, Staal spent his first 11-plus seasons with the Hurricanes. He played a 20-game stint with the New York Rangers to close the 2015-16 season, and then joined Minnesota.

NOTES: Okposo resumed practicing Friday after missing three games with a neck injury. It's unclear if he'll be cleared to play Saturday. ... Interim coach Don Granato and assistant Matt Ellis were scheduled to rejoin the team a day after being placed in the NHL's COVID-19 protocol which required them to remain in self-isolation in Pittsburgh. GM Kevyn Adams was forced to step in as coach against Pittsburgh.

## **The Latest: Sabres to have limited number of fans at 4 games**

Associated Press

March 26, 2021

The Buffalo Sabres are welcoming a limited number of fans to attend four games next month.

Tickets will go on sale Monday for Buffalo's games against the New York Rangers on April 3, Washington on April 9, Pittsburgh on April 17 and Boston on April 23.

Fans will be allowed in if they have proof of being fully vaccinated 14 days before the game, or proof of a negative PCR COVID-19 test within three days of the game. The Sabres added another option of proof of a negative antigen COVID-19 test within six hours of the doors opening.

PCR tests cost \$64 and antigen tests are \$30.

The Sabres had fans in attendance only once this season. They honored front-line health care workers last week. The team was scheduled to have paying fans attend a game against Boston two days later, but the outing was postponed after the Bruins had five players enter the NHL's COVID-19 protocol.

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Georgia baseball coach Scott Stricklin will miss his team's second straight Southeastern Conference series to continue his recovery from COVID-19.

Associate head coach Scott Daeley will again serve as acting head coach for the three-game series at Texas A&M.

Stricklin is in isolation at his home. He also missed last weekend's series against Tennessee.

No other players or coaches were affected by the coach's positive test.

The 49-year-old Stricklin is in his eighth season as Georgia's coach. He led the Bulldogs to the NCAA Tournament in 2018 and 2019.

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The National Women's Hockey League announced Friday there were no positive COVID-19 results from PCR tests administered to players and team personnel for the Isobel Cup Playoffs in Boston to decide the league champion.

Tournament participants also received rapid tests prior to traveling and there were zero positive test results, and rapid tests given to all tournament participants upon arrival at Warrior Ice Arena for practices also showed zero positive results.

Action begins Saturday and rapid tests will only be administered if a player or staff member exhibits symptoms or was exposed to a known positive case.

COVID-19 protocols include mask wearing in locker rooms and at all times when off the ice. All non-player staff have to wear masks in facilities at all times and no fans will be allowed.

Admission to the rink and associated facilities is limited to essential personnel. No fans are allowed.

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Buffalo Sabres interim coach Don Granato and assistant Matt Ellis are headed back to work after being cleared from the NHL's COVID-19 protocol.

The Sabres announced Granato and Ellis are traveling to join the team in Boston after spending a night in self-isolation in Pittsburgh.

Both were placed in the protocol on Thursday, hours before Buffalo's game against the Penguins. That led to general manager Kevyn Adams stepping in to coach the 4-0 loss, which extended the Sabres franchise-record winless skid to 0-14-2.

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The Michigan Wolverines are out of the NCAA Division I men's hockey tournament because of positive COVID-19 test results within the team's Tier 1 testing group.

The NCAA's Ice Hockey Committee and Medical Advisory Group made the decision Friday.

Michigan coach Mel Pearson said he was "devastated" for the players and called it unfortunate. He said he didn't completely understand the final decision but had to respect it.

Michigan's athletes and staff had remained in daily testing protocol since the conclusion of the Big Ten Tournament and were preparing for Friday's contest when notified by the NCAA.

The eighth-ranked Wolverines were scheduled to meet No. 9 Minnesota Duluth, the two-time defending national champion, in a Midwest Regional semifinal. The game will be ruled a no-contest and Minnesota Duluth will advance to the next round.

Michigan joins Notre Dame, who had to bow out of the tournament Thursday for the same reason.

## **A hockey whodunit: Is this \$10,000 puck the first goal in Sabres' history?**

By Jason Wolf  
The Buffalo News  
March 29, 2021

Jim Watson's brother-in-law's friend knew the president of the nation's oldest sports memorabilia auction house, and with the market for collectibles skyrocketing during the pandemic, Watson figured it was time to sell his puck.

Watson, 77, scored the first regular-season goal in Buffalo Sabres history.

The veteran defenseman's knuckling shot from the blue line with 5:01 left in the second period of a 2-1 victory against the Pittsburgh Penguins on Oct. 10, 1970, at Pittsburgh Civic Arena is preserved in grainy black-and-white photographs and video snippets. Rookie phenom Gilbert Perreault retrieved the puck from the net. And Watson said he has stored it since in a cardboard box full of memorabilia he collected since childhood.

"It was my treasure," Watson said. "But it would be nice for somebody in Buffalo to have that puck, and then it'd be back home again."

Lot number 662 in Lelands' Spring Classic 2021 catalog, titled "The Very First Goal Puck in Buffalo Sabres History," includes photos of both sides of Watson's puck and his signed, handwritten letter swearing its authenticity. The minimum starting bid is \$10,000, plus a 20% buyer's premium.

There are no takers as of Sunday night. The auction ends 11 p.m. Friday.

"This is genuinely a piece of history," Lelands president Mike Heffner said. "This is a piece of the franchise's history and NHL history. If I woke up the day after the auction and I didn't know what it sold for and you told me it sold for \$100,000, I wouldn't be shocked. I really wouldn't be. It's just that unique."

But collectors are skeptical. And their concern seems well founded. Watson's puck has birthed a mystery a half-century in the making, untangled by scattered artifacts, whispering ghosts and the fragmented memories of wrinkled men.

The Penguins' original trainer and equipment manager, Ken Carson, and his former assistant, John Doolan, who joined the team in 1970, told The Buffalo News there is no chance that Watson's puck was used in the Sabres' first game.

"I would bet my life on it," Carson said.

Watson's puck has an orange Converse insignia on one side, consistent with official game pucks of the era, and Pittsburgh's original logo on the other, with a fat cartoon penguin wearing a scarf over a reddish-brown triangle, pointed down. The lettering is blue and the background is white.

This logo was introduced during the Penguins' inaugural season in 1967-68, three years before the Sabres' first game, and replaced the following season, when the franchise unveiled new jerseys. The updated logo was a muscular penguin without a scarf over a yellow triangle. The lettering was white and the background was a white circle with a thick blue rim.

The original logo might have remained in use on pucks beyond the Penguins' first season, Carson said.

Penguins historian Casey Samuelson, who runs the website PenguinsChronicles.com, is uncertain about precisely when the pucks changed.

"Do you know how hard it is to get a picture of the puck in images from the late 1960s?" he wrote in a Twitter direct message.

Neither the Penguins, nor CCM, which distributed the pucks, responded to requests for documentation.

But both Carson and Doolan said once the Penguins began using pucks with the blue-rimmed logo, those are the only pucks that would have appeared in a game.

All older pucks with the original logo, they said, would have strictly been used for practice or pocketed by employees as souvenirs.

"I've got a couple of them," Doolan said, "but they were laying around in a desk drawer or whatever. I asked if I could have them and Kenny said, 'Sure,' so I have a couple in my collection."

These are the men who were responsible for ordering the pucks, unloading the pucks, freezing the pucks and delivering two dozen pucks in a metal bucket, filled with Zamboni ice, to the penalty box for use in each home game. There was no mass cache.

"You wouldn't even order enough pucks for a whole season at that time, because of cash flow," Carson said. "You'd probably have two or three orders during the course of the year."

Doolan said he kept a game-used puck from the 1970-71 opener because the Sabres' inaugural regular-season game was also his first in the NHL.

"I was 18 years old at the time," Doolan said, "and it was a pretty big event in my life."

Doolan's game-used puck has the updated, blue-rimmed logo, as does a second example from that game owned by John Boutet, the site and exhibition chairman for the Greater Buffalo Sports Hall of Fame.

Sabres puck -- boutet

Here is a photo of a puck used in the first Sabres' game in 1970 from the collection of John Boutet. He said he purchased the puck, a ticket and program from the game from a fan who attended.

John Boutet

Could one of the old pucks have somehow found its way into the bucket, onto the ice and Watson's stick and into the back of the Penguins' net?

"To be basically three years in, when I started in '70, I don't see that being legit, to be honest with you," Doolan said. "I'm not going to call the man a liar, but he might be misconstrued. I agree with people saying the time frame's off."

But why would Watson have the wrong puck?

And if his puck is not the puck used to score the first goal in Sabres' history, where is it?

'Pretty much proof'

Watson grew up on the ice in Kirkland Lake, a small town in Northeastern Ontario and hotbed for early NHL talent. The 6-foot-2 defenseman played professionally for teams in seven leagues, including parts of six seasons with the Detroit Red Wings, until joining the Sabres in the fifth round of the 1970 NHL expansion draft.

He was known more for his fisticuffs than finesse.

"You'd smile at people and they'd get nervous," Watson said, "especially if they had teeth. That was one of my tricks. I would sort of smile at them and wink and I'd show them I had no front teeth, you know what I mean?"

Watson's lone fluttering shot in the Sabres' inaugural game dropped at the last instant to beat his former neighbor and WHL teammate, Penguins goalie Les Binkley.

It was not only the first goal in Sabres' history, but the first goal of Watson's NHL career.

"It was a lucky shot," Watson said. "But it was exciting. And then Gilbert Perreault went and retrieved the puck and gave it to me."

Floyd Smith, the Sabres' first captain, remembers Watson's shot, Perreault fishing the puck out of the net and his teammates erupting.

"Back in those days, the players used to come roaring off the bench at special occasions and they all came off the bench at that goal," Smith said. "Jimbo shot it from the blue line. It was a seeing eye, seeing puck thing. It found its way through everything."

He laughed.

"It was as much a surprise to him as it was to us that it ended up in the net," he said.

Watson scored four goals in the NHL and seven in the minors over his 13 pro seasons.

He said he collected each puck. This one was no exception.

"I brought it over to give it to the trainer," Watson said. "And they gave it to me after the game. I kept the puck and it's been in my memorabilia box.

"It brings back good memories because you never get those memories again. You only get one shot in your lifetime that things are important like that. For me, anyway."

Watson said he would use the auction proceeds to take his wife out for dinner and to visit his daughters and grandchildren in Salt Lake City and Ontario.

"It costs so much to travel nowadays," he said.

Over the course of three interviews, Watson never changed the details in his story, no matter how many times and ways he was asked questions.

He played for the Pittsburgh Hornets of the AHL in 1964-65, and said he has a puck from that season.

He returned to Pittsburgh as an opponent during the Penguins' inaugural season, which would have offered an opportunity to collect a puck with the original logo. But he had just one shot on goal and no points in a 5-2 Red Wings victory.

Watson said he did not keep a puck from that game as a souvenir, and he does not have – nor has he ever had – another puck with a Penguins logo.

Heffner, the president of Lelands, took issue with the trainers' authority on the matter.

"I'm not saying they're lying, either," Heffner said, "but how did they know an old puck didn't slip in?"

He countered collectors' skepticism by explaining that cash-strapped teams in the 1960s and '70s might reuse old equipment.

"Jim seems as sincere and honest as the day is long and I really believe that this is something that he kept and treasured," Heffner said. "The puck alone is a pretty rare puck, and Jim didn't have a big career, so him having that puck and holding onto it for as long as he did and it being the Penguins puck is pretty much proof of what we need. We had him write a letter also on it to authenticate it."

Watson's letter contains a factual error.

He wrote that he scored in the first period, not the second – an easy enough mistake more than 50 years after the game, but one that added to some collectors' unease.

'We kept the puck'

Watson did not remember which Sabres' trainer he handed the puck, but the only two at the first game were Frank Christie and Don "Sockeye" Uren.

Both are dead.

It's unlikely either would have accidentally mixed up the pucks, said Paul Wieland, the Sabres' original public relations director and practice goalie, who was at the game and described the trainers' simple process after notable goals.

"You see this happen these days," Wieland said. "They take it and they put a piece of tape around it, white-colored tape. They put it around the rim of the puck and they mark it like, 'Watson's first goal,' the period and the time. And right away that puck doesn't get mixed up with any other pucks.

"At the end of the game they put it in his locker or hand it to him, and there's your puck from your first goal. I can't swear that's what happened with Jim Watson. But that's what I would expect would have happened."

The puck up for auction does not have tape around the rim.

Could the trainers have pocketed the real puck to sell as a collectible or keep for themselves?

"Neither of those guys would do that," said Encil "Porky" Palmer, the Sabres training staff's original "third man," who did not travel to road games. "Neither one of them. Not them."

The market for hockey collectibles was different in the early '70s than it is today.

The NHL authenticated and sold pucks used to score goals during the 1972-73 and 73-74 seasons – these are among the most collectible pucks and sell for thousands – but at the time there was little demand and the program was discontinued.

"Back in the early '70s, if you tried to sell a puck for \$20, that was crazy," Heffner said. "It just wasn't worth that."

Rip Simonick, the Sabres' longtime former equipment manager and a stick boy during the inaugural season, said Uren would resell players' extra skates. But the first goal puck, at the time, would not have carried significant monetary value.

"He wouldn't keep the puck for a souvenir or something like that," Simonick said.

Christie, the head trainer, had a hockey museum in the basement of his Town of Tonawanda home, Wieland said, but everything came with players' blessings or from other teams' trainers.

"He had pucks, sticks, jerseys – not just from the Sabres – equipment, signed gloves. You name it," Wieland said. "He'd usually just go to the other team and ask them for stuff.

"Trainers in hockey are sort of like a bunch of thieves in an English crime comedy, where nobody's really malicious."

Carson, the Penguins' original trainer, said he would have given a puck to a counterpart on an opposing team, had he asked.

"If he wanted one for historic reasons from the first year and we had one, sure, we'd give it to him," Carson said.

He did not recall giving an old puck to Christie or Uren.

Christie would not have kept the first goal puck, Palmer added, because he was tight with the Sabres' first coach, the late Punch Imlach, and the late founders and original co-owners, brothers Seymour Knox III and Northrup Knox.

The private collector who purchased Christie's hockey memorabilia said he does not have the first goal puck, according to Boutet, from the Greater Buffalo Sports Hall of Fame.

Neither does the Hockey Hall of Fame in Toronto, which has all four pucks used to score goals in the Vancouver Canucks' first NHL game, played the night before the Sabres' opener in Pittsburgh.

"We have swords from the first game (at Memorial Auditorium), we have Punch's hat, we've got stuff from the Knoxes," said Phil Pritchard, the Hall of Fame's longtime curator and "Keeper of the Stanley Cup."

"We don't have the first goal puck. Tickets and programs, but that's not first-of-a-kind stuff."

If the puck Watson is auctioning wasn't used in the Sabres' first game, and he doesn't have another puck with a Penguins logo, and the Sabres' original trainers didn't lose the real puck, sell it or keep it for themselves, and it's not in the hands of known collectors or at the Hockey Hall of Fame, where is it?

"We kept the puck," said Smith, the Sabres' first captain. "I remember that Punch had it. I didn't know he gave it back to Jim."

'Right above his head'

There are at least two pucks in private collections known to have been used in the game.

Doolan's puck and Boutet's puck have the updated, blue-rimmed logo.

Boutet said he purchased his puck, a dated Ticketron ticket and game program many years ago from a fan who attended the game.

"The guy, who has long since passed on, said the refs were coming off the ice after the game. He stood right there – and back then you could stand right next to where the players came out, there was no barrier or anything – and he said, 'Please, can I have a puck?' And the ref reached in his pocket and pulled out a puck and gave him the puck that I have now."

The program also features the Penguins' updated logo.

It's unknown whether Perreault, who scored the game-winner, the first goal of his career, kept the puck, and if so, what logo is on it. He did not return several messages seeking comment.

An original Penguins logo on Perreault's puck would establish that the old pucks were, in fact, used in the game and lend credibility to Watson's puck being genuine. A blue-rimmed logo would add to the evidence against it.

"I know when he scored his 35th goal that year – that was the rookie record at the time for goals – he kept that puck," Wieland said. "Because a photographer took a picture of him grinning with his front teeth out and holding the puck up."

Pittsburgh center Wally Boyer was the only other player to score in the game, but he had no reason to keep the puck. It was his sixth NHL season, his third with the Penguins and the 44th goal of his NHL career.

There is at least one other puck.

Seymour Knox IV said his dad had a puck from the Sabres' first game, along with a dated Ticketron ticket, mounted in a plaque with the final score, 2-1, hanging in his study at the family's former home on Nottingham Terrace. It was near the bar, on the door to the library.

"We had a chair and a telephone was right next to that chair," Knox IV said, "and dad would talk to Bob Swados all the time on it and he'd have that puck right above his head."

Swados, who died in 2012, was the Sabres' vice chairman, the secretary to the NHL's Board of Governors and general counsel to the league.

Did Knox IV happen to remember whether the Penguins logo on his dad's puck had an all-white or blue-rimmed background?

He laughed.

"It had the reverse on it," Knox IV said. "I think it said Converse."

The plaque's whereabouts are unknown.

His parents long ago sold the house on Nottingham, boxed up belongings and moved to East Aurora. It could have been lost in various auctions throughout the years.

Knox III died in 1996.

Was his puck the real first goal?

"I don't know," Knox IV said, and neither does his mom. "Unfortunately, my dad's not here to ask, but I could throw it up to him and maybe I'll get an answer in the middle of the night."

Jim Watson

Publicity photos of Jim Watson by Bob Shaver, Sabres, courtesy of John Boutet.

Publicity photos by Bob Shaver

'He wanted the puck'

Watson was incredulous during a second interview when informed about the questions surrounding the authenticity of his puck.

"How ridiculous. It's my puck! I scored the goal!" Watson said. "I took the puck! Ask the Buffalo Sabres guys. They wanted it. What's his name? I can't even remember their names now. But they wanted it and I kept it. It is the puck."

Who wanted it?

"The owners wanted it," Watson said. "They wanted it and I said, 'No, I'm keeping it myself.' "

The owners told you they wanted the puck?

"They asked me for it," Watson said. "They said, 'Jim, we want the puck. We'll put it on display.'

"I said, 'No, I'm keeping it.'

" 'Yeah,' he said. 'We'll put it in a nice plaque. We'll do this.'

"I said, 'No, I want it.'

Which owner? Seymour or Northrup?

"Seymour Knox," Watson said. "That was like 50 years ago. Of course it's the only puck. It's easy to figure out. Where are you going to get another one like it? I'm the one that wrote the nice letter saying that I swear this is the puck. It is the puck. It's the only puck in the world. It's not like you can get another one. This is the only one in the whole world."

When did this incident occur?

"Probably within a week or so," Watson said. "I'm not sure. He said they wanted the puck so they could display it. I was surprised he even asked for it. I said, 'No!' He said, 'Yeah, but we're going to ...' He put a pretty good spiel on. 'We're going to put it in a display and we're going to do this and this.' And I said, 'No, I want to keep it.' He was a little ticked off actually ... because he wanted the puck."

Pritchard, the curator at the Hockey Hall of Fame, said because the museum has all four pucks used to score goals in the Canucks' inaugural NHL game played the night before the Sabres' opener, it stands to reason that his predecessor would have reached out to Buffalo, as well.

It also stands to reason that Knox III would have informed the Sabres' coach and trainers in advance that he wanted the puck used to score his expansion team's first goal.

That's an assumption, but it makes sense.

Perhaps one of the trainers, after the goal was scored, followed instructions to give the puck to Imlach to give to Knox III and after the game gave Watson a different Penguins puck, whatever he could get his hands on, to signify the veteran defenseman's first career goal.

Watson wouldn't have known the difference.

He doesn't remember who gave him his puck.

"You're just excited. You won the game. You got the puck," Watson said. "And then you're moving on. And I've got the puck. So what do I care? I'm not thinking about all those details. I'm not an analytical kind of guy."

The logo incongruity didn't become an issue until more than 50 years later, when Watson tried to auction his puck with the original Penguins logo, which raised suspicions among collectors, which were validated by the Penguins' original trainer and his assistant, who each said that puck could not have been used in that game.

But why would Knox III later try to convince Watson to give him a puck he already had?

He couldn't display the plaque publicly if the player who scored the goal insisted that he had the real puck.

And so it hung for years in his home study, near the bar and the phone, on the door to the library.

That's a logical theory.

Will someone spend \$10,000 or more to buy Watson's puck with the original Penguins logo, convinced it somehow found its way onto the ice during the team's fourth season opener and into the back of the net for the Sabres' first goal?

"Sometimes there's no answer and you just have to go with your gut," said Heffner, the president of Lelands. "Believe me, we've made mistakes. We're human. But we also have to go a little bit on instinct when it comes to things like this, and although I see the point on the other side, I still have been around this business long enough to have more belief that it is the puck than not."

Watson believes it's genuine. He's had it this whole time. And he wouldn't part with it for any less.

"I know it's expensive," Watson said, "but I look back at all the stuff I went through and everything – it's got to be worth at least that, right?"

"We'll see. If they don't, that's OK. It goes back in my box."

## **Sabres Notebook: Linus Ullmark almost snared a win in first game back**

By Mike Harrington

The Buffalo News

March 28, 2021

It's not a stretch to say that there is no way the Buffalo Sabres are on a 17-game winless streak if goaltender Linus Ullmark had not suffered the lower-body injury that knocked him from the lineup Feb. 25.

Ullmark returned Saturday in Boston to make 33 saves in the Sabres' gut-wrenching 3-2 loss to the Bruins, and is almost certain to be in the net Monday when Buffalo opens a four-game homestand against the Philadelphia Flyers at KeyBank Center.

There's a case to be made that the bottom of the Sabres' season fell out when Ullmark got hurt, and not when Jack Eichel left the lineup. The Sabres were 6-8-2 when Ullmark got hurt in the first period of the first game in this streak. They haven't won since.

On a team that's now an NHL-worst 6-23-4, Ullmark is 5-5-2 with 2.49 goals-against average and .918 save percentage.

The Sabres have simply gotten not nearly enough goaltending from anyone else, nor have they provided Carter Hutton any goal support during some of his better starts. Hutton, Dustin Tokarski and Jonas Johnsson have combined to go 1-18-2, 3.66/.886.

In fact, the Sabres and Colorado are the only teams with just one win from backup goalies, and the Avs haven't needed any with Phillip Grubauer second in the league with 20 wins.

Among goalies who have played at least 10 games, Ullmark is 13th in the NHL in 5-on-5 save percentage at .927. The Sabres have supreme trust in Ullmark. He quickly repaid them Saturday.

"He made a ton of good saves. He was very calm back there. He played great," winger Kyle Okposo said after Sunday's game, which was lost on Craig Smith's goal with 3:50 to play. "He's the type of goalie that can give you a chance to win every night. It was good to see him back."

Ullmark was steady the entire game, moving well in the crease and swallowing pucks with his glove to prevent rebounds.

"Awkward in the beginning, but saw the puck well in the beginning, too," Ullmark said. "Guys were helping to push their guys away ... which makes it a lot easier. And then it was just after a couple shots, you're in it and it's like you've never left."

Ullmark said he didn't feel helpless watching the streak during his injury time. He wasn't coming back until he was 100% cleared to play.

"You know that there's nothing that I can do to control it. I kind of got my mind off it as much as possible," he said. "But now when you're in it, you just want to get in there and help the boys out. Sadly, I couldn't keep the puck out of the net. I thought we had a great game. We just had some unlucky bounces."

### Ugly numbers update

The Sabres are 0-13-1 in March and their only point came March 9 in a 5-4 shootout loss in Philadelphia. They've lost the last nine in regulation, and dropping the next two against the Flyers in 60 minutes would tie the Detroit Red Wings of March, 1977 for the most in any month in NHL history at 0-15-1.

Buffalo has an NHL-worst 2-11-2 record at home and is winless in the last 10 downtown (0-9-1). Incredibly, the Sabres have been outscored 39-10 in those games and have endured five shutouts.

### Goals against haunt Flyers

Meanwhile, the Flyers ended February with back-to-back 3-0 shutout wins in KeyBank Center, but their defense and goaltending have absolutely cratered this month. Philly is 5-9-1 in March and has given up an NHL-high 66 goals in those 15 games (4.4 per game). That's even worse than the Sabres' average of 4.29.

The Flyers have given up five or more goals six times this month, topped by a pair of gruesome losses to the New York Rangers (9-0 and 8-3).

Goalie Brian Elliott is 3-3-1 in the month, but with a 3.60 goals-against average and an .845 save percentage, while Carter Hart has completely fallen apart at 2-6-0 with NHL-worst figures of 5.04/.815 for the month.

You would assume Elliott will start Monday's game after posting Saturday's 2-1 win over the Rangers, and owing to his dominance of Buffalo.

Elliott is 16-2-2, 1.67/.943 in his career against the Sabres, and his numbers against them this season are downright absurd – 3-0 with two shutouts, 87 saves on 90 shots, an 0.92 GAA and .967 save percentage.

Bruins makeup is April 20

The NHL announced a bevy of makeup games and schedule changes Sunday night, mostly to accommodate recent Covid-19 shutdowns in Boston and Montreal. They will stretch the regular season to May 11, three days past its original end.

The only change involving the Sabres has the March 20 postponement here against the Bruins being set for Tuesday, April 20 at 7 p.m. That will create a three-game series vs. Boston over four nights, as the teams also meet here April 22 and 23.

It will also create a brutal seven-game stretch for the Sabres over an 11-day stretch from April 13-23. Buffalo opens it with road games at Boston and Washington, then hosts matinees against Pittsburgh on April 17-18 before the three straight home games against the Bruins.

Roster moves

The Sabres were off Sunday and will skate Monday morning. They reassigned goalie Ukko-Pekka Luukkonen and forward Brett Murray to Rochester off the taxi squad. Prior to Saturday's game, forward C.J. Smith and goaltender Michael Houser were loaned to the taxi squad.

## **Eric Staal eager to put time with Sabres behind him after trade**

By Mike Harrington

The Buffalo News

March 28, 2021

When he met the Montreal media Sunday and was first asked of his terrible time with the Buffalo Sabres, Eric Staal initially said, "The good part for me right now is I don't really need to explain. I can kind of put that behind me."

But pressed on the issue later in the 30-minute call, Staal gave a window about life into pandemic-era hockey on the NHL's worst team.

"There were so many hurdles. There were so many things that just didn't line up the way we had in mind," said Staal, who was traded to the Canadiens on Friday for two draft picks. "The reality is we started OK. We had an up and down kind of first two weeks or so. We were kind of finding our game, filling our roles and then we got hit with Covid. It went through our room like wildfire and it wasn't great. Two weeks of guys battling that and a couple guys battling it pretty hard. It was difficult. When we we came back after that we never found any footing."

And that includes Staal, who had only three goals with the Sabres and none in his final 23 games.

"Obviously it has been a very difficult season for the Sabres and for me personally there," he said. "I think there's a lot of contributing factors ... I know Kevyn is going to do the best he can to recharge that organization, recharge that program. He'll do a good job but there's a ways to go. For me, having this chance to be a Montreal Canadien and join this team with a lot of great players, a lot of talent is exciting for me."

Staal had challenges off the ice as well. In the final year of his contract, Staal opted to come to Buffalo for the season without his wife and three sons as they stayed home in Minnesota.

"I had a few moments on the phone with my family back home. Some tough times for sure," he said. "I have three boys 11, 9 and 6, and they all play hockey. They all are busy with a lot of different things and they love having dad around."

"So when I'm not around and going through some of the things I went through the last couple months it was for sure difficult. It's part of playing this game and part of life in it right now."

Staal said he's looking forward to playing meaningful games for the next few weeks in Montreal with former Team Canada Olympic teammates Corey Perry, Shea Weber and Carey Price as the Habs battle to stay in a playoff spot in the North Division

"There's no place better to play. It's always been my favorite place to play on the road and now I get to suit up for the home team," Staal said. "It's a pretty phenomenal feeling and I'm just looking forward to it."

## **Mike Harrington: Pegula's 70th comes on his team's 17th. There's nothing happy about it**

By Mike Harrington  
The Buffalo News  
March 27, 2021

BOSTON – The latest bizarre day in Sabreland started at 7:30 Saturday morning. It was a simple tweet from the Sabres' official account wishing owner Terry Pegula a happy birthday.

As you would imagine, the salutations to No. 70 for the owner did not go over very well with the fan base.

Pegula isn't a social media hound. You would hope his wife/team president, Kim, and his kids, who are Twitter regulars, skipped the replies.

Oh, the replies.

Someone posted a photo of the Feb. 23, 2011, edition of The Buffalo News, the one with the giant headline across the top that read "Destination: The Stanley Cup." Someone else noted, "He's aged 20 years this season."

Another reply wondered, "What do you get a guy who has everything BUT wins?" That was quickly followed with, "A President of Hockey Operations" and a tweet that said, "I hope your birthday is as enjoyable as watching a Sabres game."

Memo to the Sabres' social media team: Read the room. Just a little. This might have been the year to skip the salute to the boss' birthday.

The Pegulas also own the Bills, and the Bills' social media team offered a similar birthday message. While the replies were cheerier there, plenty of Sabres vitriol spilled over.

There's nothing happy about this franchise right now, and saying anything remotely nice about ownership was just asking for trouble.

Kind of like starting to think this hockey team might actually win a game.

You were waiting for bad things to happen Saturday, even after the Sabres put together two periods of good play. Sure enough, things turned sour. A 2-1 lead turned into a 3-2 loss to the Boston Bruins in TD Garden, in a game decided by Craig Smith's goal with 3:50 left.

When the final buzzer ended, poor Rasmus Dahlin took his stick in one hand over his head and pounded it on the ice. He's "up" to minus-32 in 33 games. Taylor Hall was bent over at the waist and had to be thinking, "When do I get my exit ticket?" Sam Reinhart, who scored the team's first power-play goal all month – seriously – kicked at the ice.

"Obviously, we have the weight of what's going on, but we shouldn't be squeezing our sticks right now," said Kyle Okposo, whose second-period goal produced the 2-1 lead. "We should just be playing free, playing the right way but trying to make things happen."

The Sabres played to lose in the third period as they got outshot 15-3. A better team clearly said, "We can't lose at home to these guys," and took charge. That's one problem here now: The Sabres are never going to get an off night from somebody. Opponents are going to be scared straight into making sure they're not the team on the hook for ending Buffalo's winless streak.

The mutuels are these:

- The Sabres are 6-23-4 and it's 17 and counting for their winless streak (0-15-2). The longest streak in franchise history is the second-longest in the NHL over the last 25 seasons, surpassed only by Pittsburgh's pre-Crosby 18-game skid in 2004.

- The Sabres are 0-13-1 in March, a franchise record for regulation losses in any month, and have dropped nine straight. In fact, if they lose without overtime or shootouts to Philadelphia here Monday and Wednesday, they will tie the all-time NHL record for the worst month by finishing with the same 0-15-1 mark Detroit did in March, 1977.
- Avert your eyes here: The Sabres are 32 points out of the East Division lead, 23 points out of a playoff berth, 12 points out of seventh place in their division and 10 points out of 30th place in the NHL.

Interim coach Don Granato was clearly disappointed after this one, as he should have been. He got his starting goalie back, and Linus Ullmark was solid with 33 saves. The Sabres, remember, haven't won since Ullmark went down Feb. 25 – when the season was still in play at 6-8-2.

But the Bruins pushed hard, the Sabres lost coverage in their zone like they usually do and that was that.

"They were hungry," Granato said of the Bruins. "There's a lot of things we can look at in the film and once again make the next step. And that's what you take from it. We were not as aggressive as we needed to be collectively. ... They elevated their intensity. We didn't elevate as we should have."

One guy who looked sharp was Ullmark, who yielded nary a rebound. You would think/hope he would be able to steal a game here at some point to end this thing.

"It doesn't really matter how you lose the game. It's unfortunate that we got some unlucky bounces," Ullmark said. "You've got to go home, recharge, and then come back stronger for the next one."

Watching Ullmark was a pleasure. Watching things such as Dahlin and Colin Miller looking lost in their own zone gets old. Watching Jean-Sebastian Dea start the game as the No. 1 center is the kind of thing that makes you wonder if anybody knows what they're doing.

At least Granato showed he hadn't completely lost his mind and got Dylan Cozens and Casey Mittelstadt plenty of time at center later on. These games are free reps for them. Get them as many as you can.

No more top-six roles for Jean-Sebastien Dea. Please.

Of course, logic isn't in big supply in an organization that has no hockey president and has gone nine months with a rookie general manager operating without an assistant GM. At least it seems that trend will end soon.

Back in June, Pegula said the organization was going to get "leaner" as the Sabres purged 22 members of the front office and hockey operations. Then he said "effective, efficient and economic."

He didn't want to say "suffering," but that's what he meant.

The lack of organizational structure and scouting depth has drawn guffaws across the hockey world. The winless streak has just brought the mockery further out into the open.

"How the hell do they let a young, inexperienced GM start without an AGM? Or deciding just now that he needs help?" former NHLer Jeff O'Neill railed Friday on TSN 1050 in Toronto, one of Canada's most-listened to sports stations. "That's amateur hour, man. That's East Coast League garbage. Come on."

Come on, indeed. That's what most people say when watching this team further embarrass the now-tattered tradition of a once-proud franchise.

Happy birthday, Terry.

## **Sabres Notebook: Granato and Ellis behind bench after false positives, long rides**

By Mike Harrington

The Buffalo News

March 27, 2021

BOSTON – It was a false positive and nothing more. That's why Sabres interim coach Don Granato and interim assistant Matt Ellis were kept isolated in their hotel rooms and missed Thursday night's game in Pittsburgh.

"We had to retest and we're grateful for how the retests came out and we're right back at it," Granato said in his pregame briefing prior to Saturday's game against the Boston Bruins. "I was vaccinated a month ago, had a second shot just over a week ago now. When I got the call to stay in your room that this happened, quite honestly I didn't believe it. I said, 'It's not right.'

"It didn't feel right. The protocols that have been in place have given me a level of confidence that I didn't believe it was the case."

Granato ran his pregame meetings Thursday morning and then learned of the positive tests, so he and Ellis had to isolate in their hotel rooms, rather than coach the game. Granato and Ellis could not register the required number of negative tests in time for the team plane in the evening after the 4-0 loss to the Penguins, so they returned to Buffalo. They then took a car service Friday to Boston because NHL protocols do not allow commercial air travel.

Granato, who was hospitalized for nearly two months in 2019 with pneumonia and a serious bacterial infection, said he's been careful to reduce his risks.

"I've had no anxiety coming to work at any point this year and it's because of the protocols that are in place and how serious people around our organization take it," Granato said. "So that's been very comforting for me."

As for the long car ride Friday that forced him to miss practice, Granato joked, "Heck of a day, but I got a lot of work time on the laptop."

### Appert stays for game

Rochester coach Seth Appert, who ran practice Friday in Granato's absence, stayed here and was on the bench Saturday along with Granato, Ellis and interim assistant Dan Girardi.

Appert didn't need to rush back to Rochester, because the Amerks' game Sunday against Utica was postponed by Covid-19 protocols related to the Comets. Rochester's 4-3 overtime loss Friday to Syracuse was the only game the Amerks have played since March 10.

Former Sabres and current Rochester assistants Adam Mair and Mike Weber directed the Amerks on Friday.

### Granato on Staal

Granato was philosophical on Friday's trade of Eric Staal to Montreal:

"Certainly we lost a great, great person and a great leader in the locker room," Granato said. "I watched his in-between period interview the other day and he looked exhausted and depleted. I can tell you, behind the scenes, he's the exact opposite. He was amazing. Keeping guys up on the bench through this adversity and challenge in the locker room, saying the right thing.

"So for me as a coach, certainly as a new coach, I could not have asked for a more supportive veteran, experienced player around."

Staal, who was traded for a third- and fifth-round pick in this year's draft, will wear No. 21 for the Habs. He is scheduled to speak to the Montreal media for the first time Sunday.

### No timetable for Hutton

The Sabres have still not specified an outlook for goaltender Carter Hutton, who exited Monday's game in New York with what looked to be a serious injury to his left leg. In general, no word means the player is likely to return this season. The club has been immediately forthcoming with injuries that are long-term, such as the season-ending ailments suffered by Zemgus Girgensons and Jake McCabe.

"No update on Carter other than lower body and we still we don't have a timetable," Granato said. "So the update will be when we know the timetable for that."

Wisconsin out, Weissbach decision to come

Granato's brother, former NHL player and current University of Wisconsin coach Tony Granato, was an upset victim in the NCAA hockey tournament. His top-seeded team was a 6-3 loser to No. 4 Bemidji State on Friday.

The game also marked the end of the college career of Wisconsin winger Linus Weissbach, the Sabres' seventh round pick in 2017. Weissbach posted career highs this year in goals, assists and points over 31 games (12-29-41). Speculation persists that Weissbach is not signing with the Sabres and will pursue free agency now that he's finished his four years with the Badgers.

University of Michigan goalie Erik Portillo, Buffalo's third-round pick in 2019, won't get a chance in the NCAAs as Michigan was shelved from the tournament due to Covid-19 protocols. Portillo went 4-1, 1.67/.935 in seven games for the Wolverines this season.

Minnesota defenseman Ryan Johnson, the Sabres' second first-round pick in 2019, played his NCAA game for the Gophers late Saturday night against Omaha. Johnson had one goal, 11 assists and a plus-13 rating for Minnesota in the regular season.

## **The Wraparound: Streak hits 17 as late goal sinks Sabres in Boston**

By Mike Harrington

The Buffalo News

March 27, 2021

BOSTON – The misery continues. And for the Buffalo Sabres, this one probably hurt more than any other game during the most horrific stretch of hockey in franchise history.

The Sabres were 20 minutes away from snapping the winless streak that has stretched more than a month. Instead, they gave up two third-period goals and suffered a 3-2 loss to the Boston Bruins on Craig Smith's goal with 3:50 to play in TD Garden.

Smith took a David Krejci feed to the slot and tapped the puck past Linus Ullmark to extend Buffalo's winless streak to 17 games (0-15-2). The franchise-record run is the longest in the NHL since 2003. The Sabres have lost nine straight in regulation.

The Sabres had a 2-1 lead through two periods, but the Bruins got even on Nick Ritchie's goal at 5:22 of the third. Boston defenseman Charlie McAvoy kept possession for several seconds in the Buffalo end, skating a couple of wide circles before finally trying to pass the puck to the goalmouth.

It hit the skate of Rasmus Ristolainen and dropped in the crease, giving Ritchie an easy tap-in.

The loss spoiled a solid effort by Ullmark, who made 33 saves in his first game since suffering a leg injury Feb. 25. The Bruins outshot the Sabres 15-3 in the third period and 36-27 for the game.

Surprise absence: The Bruins played without star winger Brad Marchand as coach Bruce Cassidy announced 90 minutes before faceoff that one of the NHL's chief pests had landed on the Covid-19 protocol list. Marchand is second on the team with 12 goals and is the leader in assists (22) and points (34).

In 46 career games against Buffalo, Marchand has 20 goals and 43 points.

"You're always going to get thrown curve balls," Cassidy said. "'Marchie' plays on average 19 minutes. That's 19 minutes for somebody else, so step up and grab it. Every player in that room probably wants more responsibility. No player says 'Play me less, coach.' So here's a day that they're going to get some of that."

Trent Frederic took Marchand's spot on Boston's top line at left wing with Patrice Bergeron and David Pastrnak.

Thanks very much: Sam Reinhart opened the scoring on a power play at 2:01 of the first period, intercepting a pass from Boston goalie Dan Vladar and backhanding the puck into an empty net before the Boston goalie could scramble back into place.

The 6-foot-6 Vladar, a Czech who was Boston's third-round pick in 2015, was playing his second NHL game. He won his first one March 16 over Pittsburgh by making 34 saves.

Power play drought ends: The Reinhart goal snapped Buffalo's skid with the man advantage at 28 straight scoreless attempts. Buffalo was 0 for 22 in March and had not scored on the power play since Reinhart's game-tying tally in the third period of the Feb. 25 overtime loss to New Jersey.

Getting even: Boston tied the game 1-1 on defenseman Matt Grzelcyk's screened wrist shot at 11:41 of the second period. It came after a 20-second possession with the Bruins at 6-on-5 after a Rasmus Dahlin turnover led to Dahlin taking a hooking penalty. The Bruins got Vladar out of the net and kept the pressure on in the Buffalo end before Grzelcyk, a Boston University teammate of Jack Eichel, got the goal.

Second-period blues: The Sabres have been outscored 32-9 in the second period during the 17-game skid. They were even at 1-1 in this game.

Rarely in front: The Sabres' leads after the first and second periods were just the seventh time in 33 games this season that they've led after each frame. Reinhart's goal marked only the 10th time they opened the scoring.

In the house: The Bruins welcomes a socially-distanced crowd of 2,191, about 12 percent of a normal sellout of 17,000+. They were noticeable, particularly during the third-period rendition of Dropkick Murphys "Shipping up to Boston" that's a staple of games here.

Next: The Sabres are off Sunday and play their next four games in KeyBank Center against Philadelphia and the New York Rangers. They start the stretch by meeting the the struggling Flyers on Monday and Wednesday.

## **Sabres notebook: Granato, Ellis clear Covid protocol and will return to bench Saturday**

By Mike Harrington  
The Buffalo News  
March 26, 2021

BOSTON – Don Granato and Matt Ellis will be back behind the Sabres' bench here Saturday afternoon.

The Sabres interim head coach and interim assistant were cleared out of Covid protocol Friday and made their way here from Pittsburgh. Rochester Amerks coach Seth Appert directed practice in TD Garden.

Appert drove from Rochester to Pittsburgh and joined the team in the second period Thursday. Because he was here simply to run drills and is not coaching in Saturday's 1 p.m. matinee against the Boston Bruins, the team did not make Appert available to the media.

The team and NHL does not disclose the nature of someone's trip to Covid protocol, but the quick return of the Sabres' coaches is indicative of a false positive test that they produced or was produced by a close contact.

Appert ran the workout along with interim assistant Dan Girardi, video coach Myles Fee and skating development coach Mike Ansell.

Granato and Ellis were both held out of Thursday's 4-0 loss in Pittsburgh and General Manager Kevyn Adams stepped behind the bench for the shutout defeat that extended the franchise-record winless streak to 16 games.

Tickets for four games go on sale Monday

The Sabres will put tickets on sale for four April home games on Monday morning – and fans will be able to show proof of vaccination to attend instead of being required to produce a negative test for Covid-19.

Tickets go on sale to the public at 2 p.m. Monday. Season ticket holders will have an exclusive window to purchase starting at 10 a.m. and will automatically receive a discount on the box office price.

The games are April 3 against the New York Rangers, April 9 against Washington, April 17 against Pittsburgh and April 23 against Boston. The contest against the Penguins starts at 3 p.m. and the others are at 7 p.m.

Fans who are fully vaccinated can show their vaccination cards when entering the arena. To qualify as "fully vaccinated," fans will need to have received their second dose of the Pfizer or Moderna vaccine or the single dose of the Johnson & Johnson vaccine at least 14 days prior to the game date.

Fans who don't meet those qualifications will need to test to enter. They must show proof of a negative antigen test taken within six hours of puck drop, or proof of negative molecular PCR test taken within 72 hours of the game.

The Sabres are again collaborating with Quest Diagnostics for testing. Quest offers antigen tests for \$30 with test results within 30 minutes and PCR tests for \$64.

Fans can schedule tests online. All payments and scheduling are done through Quest and not the Sabres.

The Sabres are not selling tickets for their first three home games next week against Philadelphia Monday and Wednesday and the Rangers Thursday. They initially planned to have fans in the building for the March 20 game against Boston but that contest was postponed when the Bruins had five players land on the Covid protocol list.

Okposo 'alarmed' by neck issue

Tage Thompson returned to practice after missing two games due to illness while Kyle Okposo was also on the ice after missing the first three games after having some issue following Sunday's practice. They skated on a fifth line of forwards with taxi squad player Brett Murray and won't play Saturday.

Okposo, of course, has a history of concussion symptoms and said this situation was neck-related.

"Got it worked on and was able to get better quickly," Okposo said. "So I stayed out in front of it, which is good.

"I was alarmed for sure. It's something that has been part of my life here over the past number of years and something that probably we'll continue to deal with. But I have a great, great team here in place and great people around me to work with. So I'm happy that we dealt with it quickly."

Bruins' Cassidy seeking more zip

The Bruins are coming off Thursday's 4-3 overtime loss to the New York Islanders and coach Bruce Cassidy put them through a rare double practice session earlier Friday. They are just 4-3-3 in March and have slipped to fourth in the East Division, albeit with 3-5 games in hand on the teams above them.

A surly Boston coach looking to prod his players is probably not good news for the Sabres, who are 0-5-1 in their last six games against the Bruins. Boston won the first meeting of the season, 4-1, on March 18 in KeyBank Center.

"We have to have a little more of a mindset that what we do in practice can help translate to success in games," Cassidy said. "And I think we've done a good job of that around here. We're a team that generally practices well. It wasn't a lack of effort today. It was more of a lack of mindset of shooting and scoring goals."

Goalie Tuukka Rask, who left Thursday's game with an upper-body injury, won't play Saturday. He could be replaced by 23-year-old third-stringer Daniel Vladar, who made 34 saves to win his only NHL start March 16 at Pittsburgh.

## **Sabres to host fans for four more games, accept vaccinations in lieu of testing**

By Mike Harrington

The Buffalo News

March 26, 2021

The Buffalo Sabres have announced they will put tickets on sale for four more home games in KeyBank Center – and fans will be able to show proof of vaccination to attend instead of being required to produce a negative test for Covid-19.

Tickets go on sale at 2 p.m. Monday. Season ticket holders will have an exclusive window to purchase tickets starting at 10 a.m. and will automatically receive a discount on the box office price.

The games are April 3 against the New York Rangers, April 9 against Washington, April 17 against Pittsburgh and April 23 against Boston. The contest against the Penguins starts at 3 p.m. and the others are at 7.

Fans who are fully vaccinated can show their vaccination card when entering the arena. To qualify as "fully vaccinated," fans will need to have received their second dose of the Pfizer-BioNtech or Moderna Covid-19 vaccine or the single dose of the Johnson & Johnson's Janssen Covid-19 vaccine at least 14 days prior to the date of the game.

Fans who don't meet those qualifications will need to test to enter. They must show proof of a negative antigen test taken within six hours of puck drop, or proof of negative molecular PCR test taken within 72 hours of the game.

The Sabres are again collaborating with Quest Diagnostics for testing. Quest offers antigen tests for \$30 with test results within 30 minutes and PCR tests for \$64.

Fans can schedule tests online. All payments and scheduling are done through Quest and not the Sabres.

The Sabres are not selling tickets for three of their four home games next week against Philadelphia and the New York Rangers. Only the April 3 game will be ticketed.

They initially planned to have fans in the building for the March 20 game against Boston but that contest was postponed when the Bruins had five players land on the Covid protocol list. It has yet to be rescheduled. The team hosted 700 front-line workers for the March 18 game against the Bruins.

## **In dealing Eric Staal to Habs, Kevyn Adams makes first big pre-deadline move**

By Mike Harrington

The Buffalo News

March 26, 2021

BOSTON – Trading goaltender Jonas Johansson to Colorado last weekend was just a sneak preview at what was to come. Sabres General Manager Kevyn Adams moved on to some feature presentations Friday.

Getting a big jump on the April 12 NHL trade deadline, Adams sent veteran center Eric Staal to the Montreal Canadiens for a third- and fifth-round pick in the 2021 draft. Buffalo also retained half of Staal's \$3.25 million cap hit.

Staal played 19 minutes, 14 seconds in Thursday's 4-0 loss at Pittsburgh and it was one of his better performances in recent games as the Sabres continue to muddle through their franchise-record 16-game winless streak. When he did not practice here Friday in advance of Saturday's game against the Boston Bruins, antennas were raised.

Word circulated that Sabres players had said their goodbyes in the dressing room, a fact that winger Kyle Okposo confirmed.

"Found out about 'Staalsie' right before practice and just got off the ice to go wish him well," said Okposo. "He's a character guy. He's a really good person. He's a good man. He's had a heck of a career to date. And he's gonna continue to play well, so wish him nothing but the best."

"He's been unbelievable," defenseman Brandon Montour added when asked about Staal's presence in the dressing room. "I think you can see his passion. Obviously, he's experienced everything he can as a player and all the success that he's had. Even in his downtime here he always came in with a positive mindset. Always a great guy to even just lead the younger guys onward."

Acquired in a September trade with Minnesota, where he was coming off a 19-goal, 66-point season, Staal's production went bust with the Sabres. He didn't score in his final 23 games and finished with just three goals, 10 points and a minus-20 rating.

And this comes from a player who had been a 20-goal scorer 10 times in his career.

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

Staal and Adams were teammates on the 2006 Stanley Cup champion Carolina Hurricanes and Staal's experience and playoff pedigree made him intriguing to teams as a rental. Earlier this month, TSN pegged Edmonton as a possible destination for the unrestricted free agent, but Staal reportedly was not keen on the 14-day quarantine required of players heading into Canada.

CBC reported Thursday that the Canadian government is willing to drop that to seven days and Adams moved quickly. So did Staal, who waved a limited no-trade clause to accept a deal to the Habs.

"The professionalism Eric displayed during his time with the Sabres was felt by everybody in our organization from top to bottom," Adams said in a statement. "I know his leadership and demeanor were valued by our players, coaches and staff, and Eric's impact on our young players is obvious. It was a pleasure to be around Eric again and I wish him and his family all the best."

The trading of Staal is just the first big, um, skate to drop for the Sabres. Winger Taylor Hall has a no-trade clause but quickly answered, "Yeah, sure," when asked Thursday if he would drop it and accept a move.

The Sabres would likely need to retain as much as half of Hall's \$8 million cap hit to facilitate a deal for him. Pierre LeBrun of TSN and the Athletic said Friday that Adams is shopping around trying to get a first-round draft pick for Hall, the 2018 Hart Trophy winner as league MVP.

Montour, another UFA, could be an intriguing rental for teams looking for blueline help.

"I can only control being on the ice," Montour said. "I'm not my agent or the GM. I think everybody knows I'm a UFA at the end of the year. Teams could be calling, could not be calling. That's not my decision. If I'm wearing a Buffalo Sabres jersey or whatever jersey, I'm a player and my job is to go on the ice, so that's all I'm focused on."

Forwards Tobias Rieder and Riley Sheahan, defenseman Matt Irwin and goaltenders Linus Ullmark and Carter Hutton are all pending UFAs. Both goalies have been injured but Ullmark practiced again Friday and it's possible he gets the call here Saturday.

With that bevy of players and perhaps others as well, there's no shortage of plot lines Adams can write the next 2 1/2 weeks.

"It's pretty obvious. I mean, nobody's naive here," Okposo said. "Everybody knows what's going on, the situation that we're in, and we know that there's going to be changes coming. Still doesn't make it any easier."

## **Don Granato, Matt Ellis clear Covid-19 protocol**

By Mike Harrington

The Buffalo News

March 26, 2021

BOSTON – There was lots going on as the Sabres hit the ice for practice Friday afternoon in TD Garden.

Rochester Amerks coach Seth Appert led the practice but the team got some good news right before the workout with word that interim head coach Don Granato and interim assistant Matt Ellis have both cleared Covid-19 protocol.

Granato and Ellis were both held out of Thursday's 4-0 loss in Pittsburgh and General Manager Kevyn Adams stepped behind the bench for the shutout defeat that extended the franchise-record winless streak to 16 games.

The big news on the player front was the absence of veteran center Eric Staal, the subject of many trade rumors heading into the April 12 NHL trade deadline. Staal was traded later in the day to the Montreal Canadiens for 2021 third- and fifth-round draft picks.

Kyle Okposo (upper body) and Tage Thompson (illness) returned to practice. Okposo has missed all three games on this road trip and Thompson has sat for the last two.

The lines at practice were set this way:

Olofsson-Sheahan-Cozens

Hall-Dea-Reinhart

Mittelstadt-Lazar-Skinner

Fogarty-Eakin-Smith

Thompson-Murray-Okposo

Sarah Obama, matriarch of Barack Obama's Kenyan family, has died

On defense, it was Bryson-Ristolainen, Dahlin-Jokiharju, Montour-Miller. The goalies were Linus Ullmark, Dustin Tokarski, Michael Houser and Ukko-Pekka Luukkonen.

The team said Granato and Ellis will join the club here later Friday. The Sabres have their first meeting of the season in Boston with the Bruins in TD Garden at 1 p.m. Saturday. The Bruins are coming off Thursday's 4-3 overtime loss to the New York Islanders and coach Bruce Cassidy put them through a rare double practice session earlier Friday.

That's probably not good news for the Sabres, who are 0-5-1 in their last six games against the Bruins. Boston won the first meeting of the season, 4-1, on March 18 in KeyBank Center. The teams' March 20 game was postponed when five Bruins went on the Covid protocol list.

Appert ran the workout along with interim assistant Dan Girardi, video coach Myles Fee and skating development coach Mike Ansell.

## **OPINION: Sabres were better team for 40 minutes, but still lost in Boston**

By Paul Hamilton

WGR 550

March 27, 2021

(WGR 550) – The Buffalo Sabres played a good 40 minutes in Boston on Saturday and looked to be in pretty good position to break their 16-game winless streak against the Bruins.

The Sabres led 2-1 and were doing a good job skating and limited great chances. Buffalo was the better team in the first 40 minutes, but that all ended in the third period, as they stopped skating and let a rookie goalie stand down in his end, making three saves and lost 3-2.

The shots, when it mattered the most, were 15-3 in favor of the Bruins, costing a very fragile-minded group their 17th-straight loss.

"They elevated their intensity, and we didn't elevate as we should have," as it was said best by interim head coach Don Granato when it was over.

The third period game-winning goal was especially hard to watch.

First, Craig Smith easily blows by Casey Mittelstadt in the neutral zone. The puck winds up to the right of Linus Ullmark with Nick Ritchie and David Krejci working extremely hard around the net to keep the play alive. All five Sabres that were around the net all became spectators and puck watchers, and none of them had any idea that Smith had come into the slot free. The puck squirted out to him and with 3:50 left in the game, the Bruins had their first lead.

As Granato talked about the game, he felt there was more to that goal than what I just described.

"I didn't like how it came down the rink and into the zone," Granato explained. "We had multiple layers of opportunity to create more initiative to create a turnover sooner, so the fact that we didn't do that consecutively tells you we're in a state of hesitation."

The Sabres were only behind for 3:50 in this whole game, but still couldn't do the right things when it counted.

The Sabres did break a 0-for-28 slump on the power play early in the game when Bruins goalie Dan Vladar went behind the net and just handed the puck to Sam Reinhart, who deposited his first goal in nine games into the empty net. Buffalo hadn't scored a power play goal in 16 games.

Buffalo took a 2-1 lead on a play that saw Steven Fogarty and Kyle Okposo go to the net. Okposo had to win a battle and found himself with a rebound and an empty net. Good things can happen when you're in the places where goals are scored.

Ullmark was back after missing 15 games with a lower-body injury. He played a solid game, making 33 saves.

In Ullmark's absence, Carter Hutton played seven games, Jonas Johansson started six and Dustin Tokarski started two. Hutton was 0-6-0 with a 3.67 goals-against average and an .883 save percentage. Johansson was 0-5-1 with a 3.82 goals-against average and an .884 save percentage, and Tokarski was 0-3-0 with a 4.11 goals-against average and an .890 save percentage.

I didn't like the fact that Granato started the game with Dylan Cozens on the right wing. That only lasted a period when Cozens went to center with Jeff Skinner and Victor Olofsson. I think Cozens should be getting the centers reps until the end of the season, because it will only make him better for next year.

Granato is also reducing Cozens' ice-time, giving him just 12:48. Fogarty and J.S. Dea were the only others that played less.

The Sabres' next chance to break their winless skid is Monday against the Philadelphia Flyers back in Buffalo.

## **OPINION: Three observations: Ullmark's return keeps Sabres in it, but Bruins prevail**

By TJ Luckman

WGR 550

March 27, 2021

It was probably the best chance the Buffalo Sabres had to win a game in 17 tries. Instead, with a little over three minutes to go in the third period, the Boston Bruins pulled ahead for the first time all game at TD Garden.

With the 3-2 loss to the Bruins, that marks Buffalo's 17th-straight winless effort.

Sabres goaltender Linus Ullmark returned to the Sabres' crease and held a steady presence in the nets all afternoon, but it was not enough for a Sabre team that put up just two goals.

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

### 1.) Ullmark provides boost in net for Buffalo

Through the first two periods, the Sabres seemed to play a much looser game than they had over the last 16 games during their winless streak.

It's possible that the Sabres felt a bit more confident with Linus Ullmark in their crease. Ullmark had missed the previous 16 games due to a lower-body injury suffered during a game against the New Jersey Devils back at the end of February.

Ullmark made quite a few big saves in instill that confidence early, and his steady play never let up.

Ullmark was up to task all game, including in the third period when the Bruins peppered 15 shots on him. Ullmark made 33 saves on 36 shots in the contest.

### 2.) Sabres fall apart in third period

As just mentioned, the Bruins tallied 15 shots in the final frame of Saturday afternoon's matchup with the Sabres.

Buffalo only mustered three shots.

The Sabres had played a couple of good periods against the Bruins in the opening 40 minutes of the game, but Buffalo simply couldn't get it going in the closing 20 minutes.

Buffalo put a lot of pressure on the Bruins in the final minutes of the period, but they lacked that pressure earlier in the period, and the Bruins were able to capitalize on a couple of scoring chances to pull ahead for good late in the third period.

### 3.) Power play ends scoreless streak after 15 games

At the very least, one unfortunate streak did end for the Sabres on Saturday afternoon. Sabres forward Sam Reinhart scored the first power play goal over 29 chances and 15 games.

Before Sabres captain Jack Eichel got injured in a game against the New Jersey Devils in February, the Sabres lead the league in power play conversion percentage, but since their power play skid, their standing in the league has fallen considerably, down to 14th place in the league with a 23.3% conversion rate.

The goal was fairly fluky, with Bruins goaltender Daniel Vladar playing the puck behind the net early in the first period. His play of the puck landed directly on Reinhart's stick behind the net. Reinhart reacted quickly and got the puck out from and scored before Vladar could get back in the net.

Even so, a fluky goal could be what the Sabres needed to get the power play back on track.

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Buffalo's latest effort was one of the few that nearly resulted in a win for them. Their next chance to win a game will come against the reeling Flyers on Monday night back home at KeyBank Center. The Flyers are 3-6-1 in their last 10 games, coming off a victory over the New York Rangers on Saturday afternoon.

We'll have all the action beginning with the Paul William Beltz Pregame Show with Mike Schopp and the Bulldog at 6 p.m. ET. They'll lead you all the way to opening puck drop scheduled for just after 7 p.m. ET on the radio flagship station of the Sabres - WGR Sports Radio 550.

## **17 winless games in a row for the Sabres**

By Kyle Powell

WGR 550

March 27, 2021

In Linus Ullmark's return to the lineup on Saturday, the Buffalo Sabres only trailed for less than four minutes all afternoon. Unfortunately, it happened to be the final four minutes of regulation against the Boston Bruins, who downed Buffalo by a final score of 3-2 at TD Garden.

It was Buffalo getting the scoring party started first, as the Sabres did something they had not accomplished since the start of their current winless streak. On an early power play opportunity, Sam Reinhart found the back of the net, taking advantage of a mistake by Bruins netminder Daniel Vladar.

It was Reinhart's 12th goal of the season, and first in the last nine games for the team's leading goal-scorer.

Boston found the tying goal 11:41 into the second period of play, when defenseman Matt Grzelcyk's point shot found its way through heavy traffic in front of Ullmark and hit twine.

The Sabres got their lead back a few minutes later when Kyle Okposo jumped on a loose puck shot initially by Henri Jokiharju. Okposo lifted his backhand shot past a frantic Vladar for the veteran's second goal of the year. Both have come against Boston.

Jokiharju and Steven Fogarty were credited with the assists on the goal, giving Fogarty his first career point in the National Hockey League.

The home team had a response yet again just 5:22 into the final period of regulation. Forward Nick Ritchie was the beneficiary of a goal after a pass attempt from defenseman Charlie McAvoy bounced off Rasmus Ristolainen in front of the net.

The Bruins took their first lead of the afternoon with less than four minutes to play. Veteran Craig Smith was in the right place at the right time, as a net-front scramble saw the puck carom to his spot on the right-side of Ullmark just outside of the crease. It was the forward's sixth goal of the season.

Smith's goal stood as the game-winner, as the Sabres didn't have an answer after falling behind.

Buffalo's winless streak hit an unfathomable 17 games in a row. The team is 0-15-2 in that stretch.

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### GAME SUMMARY

#### Goal Summary:

##### First Period:

BUF: 2:01 - Sam Reinhart (12) PPG (Unassisted)

BOS: NONE

##### Second Period:

BUF: 14:12 - Kyle Okposo (2) (Henri Jokiharju, Steven Fogarty)

BOS: 11:41 - Matt Grzelcyk (2) (David Pastrnak, Patrice Bergeron)

##### Third Period:

BUF: NONE

BOS: 5:22 - Nick Ritchie (9) (Charlie McAvoy, Matt Grzelcyk); 16:10 - Craig Smith (6) (David Krejci, Nick Ritchie)

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#### Penalty Summary:

First Period:

BUF: 4:06 - Brandon Montour (Tripping - 2 min.); 14:59 - Casey Mittelstadt (Hooking - 2 min.)

BOS: 1:16 - Connor Clifton (Elbowing - 2 min.); 18:54 - David Pastrnak (Tripping - 2 min.)

Second Period:

BUF: 15:00 - Jean-Sebastian Dea (High-sticking - 2 min.)

BOS: 7:15 - Charlie Coyle (High-sticking - 2 min.)

Third Period:

BUF: 9:38 - Brandon Montour (Hooking - 2 min.); 19:35 - Rasmus Ristolainen (Goaltender interference - 2 min.)

BOS: NONE

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STATS OF THE GAME

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Losi and Gangi Three Stars of the Game:

1.) Craig Smith - BOS

2.) Charlie McAvoy - BOS

3.) Nick Ritchie - BOS

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What's Next:

The blue and gold return home on Monday night, as the Sabres take on the Philadelphia Flyers. Puck drop at KeyBank Center is set for 7 p.m. ET with the Paul William Beltz Pregame Show with Mike Schopp and the Bulldog starting at 6 p.m. ET on the radio home of the Sabres - WGR Sports Radio 550.

## **Sabres trade Eric Staal to Montreal for two draft picks**

By Joe DiBiase

WGR 550

March 26, 2021

We are closing in on the NHL Trade Deadline on April 12, and the Buffalo Sabres are not waiting around to move center Eric Staal off the roster.

The Sabres have dealt Staal to the Montreal Canadiens in exchange for third and fifth round picks in the 2021 NHL Draft. TSN hockey insider Frank Seravalli was the first to report the pending move for the Sabres.

The Sabres are retaining \$1.625 million of Staal's cap hit and are saving \$565,000 in real dollars with the move.

According to TSN's Pierre LeBrun, Staal waived his no trade clause to go to Montreal.

In 32 games with the Sabres this season, the 36-year-old scored just three goals and added seven assists for 10 points.

Staal gives Montreal some needed depth at the center position behind Phillip Danault and Nick Suzuki.

The Sabres acquired Staal from the Minnesota Wild in September in exchange for forward Marcus Johansson.

Johansson has dealt with injuries for most of the season in Minnesota, but has been playing on the Wild's second line since his return to the ice a few weeks ago.

## **Sabres fans to return to KeyBank Center on April 3**

By Joe DiBiase

WGR 550

March 26, 2021

The Buffalo Sabres have announced that fans will return to KeyBank Center for four home games this season:

- Saturday, April 3 vs. New York Rangers (7 p.m. ET)
- Friday, April 9 vs. Washington Capitals (7 p.m. ET)
- Saturday, April 17 vs. Pittsburgh Penguins (3 p.m. ET)
- Friday, April 23 vs. Boston Bruins (7 p.m. ET)

Fans now have two options to qualify for entry to games: Either proof of a negative COVID-19 test (antigen or PCR) or provide proof of vaccination.

The Sabres are working with Quest Diagnostics to facilitate tests. Quest offers antigen tests for \$30 and PCR tests for \$64.

Fans can get more information and make an appointment at <http://patient.questdiagnostics.com/buffalo-sabres>.

Season ticket holders will have an exclusive window to purchase tickets on Monday, March 29 at 10 a.m. ET.

Limited tickets will go on sale to the public at 2 p.m. ET that same day.

## **Don Granato, Matt Ellis clear COVID-19 protocols**

By Brayton J. Wilson

WGR 550

March 26, 2021

The Buffalo Sabres got some much-needed good news on Friday as interim head coach Don Granato and interim assistant coach Matt Ellis have both cleared the NHL's COVID-19 Protocols, the team announced.

The Sabres were forced to play Thursday night's game against the Pittsburgh Penguins without both coaches after they entered the COVID-19 protocols just a couple hours before puck drop at PPG Paints Arena. That forced general manager Kevyn Adams to step in behind the bench and serve as the stand-in head coach. Rochester Americans head coach Seth Appert made the trip to Pittsburgh and joined the team to help coach with Adams and Dan Girardi.

The Sabres ended up losing Thursday's game, 4-0, suffering their 16th-consecutive loss and seventh shutout loss of the 2020-21 season.

Both coaches were not on the ice for Friday's practice at TD Garden in Boston. They will re-join the team after practice, as they get ready to face the Bruins on Saturday afternoon. Running practice on Friday for the Sabres were Appert, Girardi, skating development coach Mike Ansell and video coach Myles Fee.

Despite not having Granato and Ellis back just yet for practice, Sabres defenseman Brandon Montour was very pleased with the news that both coaches cleared COVID-19 protocols.

"We've experienced it a few times now with positive cases. Those newer faces on the bench, newer roles with 'Donnie' [Granato], and we were all hoping for the best news with his sake and his health," Montour said following Friday's practice. "All we were thinking about was the health of them and hopefully their safe, so we're glad everything's kind of on track with that, and we'll see them soon."

Buffalo got more good news on Friday with a pair of players returning to the ice for team practice.

Tage Thompson was back skating again after missing the last two games due to a non-COVID-19 related illness. He skated on a line with Brett Murray, who was recently called up from the Rochester Americans and assigned to the taxi squad.

The third member of that line was Kyle Okposo, who made the trip to Boston after missing the start of the road trip with an upper-body injury. When asked about what happened before the road trip, Okposo was not particularly sure when it happened.

"I believe it happened in practice, and it was kind of something that I've dealt with in the past, kind of some of those similar symptoms that have popped up in the past," Okposo said after Friday's session in Boston. "It was more of my neck, and I got it worked on and was able to get better quickly. We stayed out in front of it, which was good."

Okposo has had well-documented issues in the past with concussions, which has tied in to some other issues with neck injuries that led to some scary symptoms. The 32-year-old admitted that he was alarmed by what he was feeling after practicing with the team on Sunday before the trip.

"It's something that's been part of my life here over the past number of years, and something that [I'll] probably will continue to deal with, but I have a great team here in place and great people around me to work with that know what to do and how to get through it," Okposo said. "I'm happy that I dealt with it quickly."

With Okposo skating on the line with Thompson and Murray, it seems unlikely that he will be in the lineup for Saturday's game in Boston. However, it could be possible for him to get back to game action Monday night against the Philadelphia Flyers back home at KeyBank Center.

"We'll see what happens. It's up to the coaches and the staff, and kind of see what happens. Haven't made any decisions yet," Okposo said.

Meanwhile, forward Eric Staal was not on the ice for the Sabres on Friday. It was reported by TSN hockey insider Frank Seravalli that Buffalo was working on a trade with Staal, with the Montreal Canadiens being considered the top contender to land the veteran center.

Later in the afternoon, both teams made the trade official, with the Sabres acquiring a third and fifth round pick in the 2021 NHL Draft from the Canadiens for Staal.

While the deal for Staal had not yet been made official when speaking with Okposo, the veteran forward knew that a deal was coming in his post-practice comments.

"It's pretty obvious. No body is naive here. Everybody knows what's going on with the situation we're in and we know that there's going to be changes coming. It still doesn't make it any easier," Okposo said. "I found out about 'Staalsy' [Staal] right before practice, and just got off the ice to wish him well. He's a character guy, he's a really good person, he's a good man. He's had a heck of a career to date, and he's going to continue to play well. Wish him nothing but the best."

The Sabres will face off with the Bruins on Saturday at 1 p.m. ET with pregame coverage on WGR starting at 12 p.m. ET with Brian Koziol. You will be able to hear from Granato for the first time since clearing COVID-19 protocols, while also hearing from both Montour and Okposo.

## **NHL Trade Grades: Canadiens add Eric Staal; Kings deal for Brendan Lemieux**

By Corey Pronman and Dom Luszczyszyn

The Athletic

March 27, 2021

The trade:

The Montreal Canadiens acquire veteran forward Eric Staal.

The Buffalo Sabres acquire a third-round and fifth-round draft pick. They also retain \$1.625 million of Staal's salary.

Montreal Canadiens

Custance: Give the Canadiens credit for striking relatively quickly here, especially after the quarantine rules adjustment. Every additional game teams can get out of their trade deadline additions is going to be really beneficial. But they paid a premium to make it happen, which we'll get to in a second.

The first question is this: What does Eric Staal have left in the tank?

As one source pointed out, like most Sabres, his good games haven't been frequent enough. But that's not a great situation in Buffalo right now, and it's quite possible that the switch to a playoff race will up the engagement level.

"Speed is obviously an issue," said a talent evaluator. "He's still heavy. On a second power play, he can be that net-front guy."

Added an NHL coach via text: "Still a good player. Not what he once was, but he can still play... He skates well, strong on the puck and good instincts. And obviously, a high-character person who has won."

The exec pointed out that the value of this deal may boil down to the team Montreal faces in the playoffs. If it's a team loaded with speed, it could be problematic.

"But if they played Winnipeg, he's more of a fit for that series," he said.

It was also noted that the Canadiens have a lot of draft picks so they were dealing from a position of strength here. Even with the deal, they have 12 picks in the 2021 draft, according to CapFriendly. That's still a ton. Maybe too much.

It's a fairly low-risk proposition for the Canadiens.

"I think there is something left in the tank but close to the end," texted one exec about Staal.

Grade: C

Luszczyszyn: I like this gamble for Montreal given Staal isn't far removed from being an impact player. Last season for the Wild he scored at a 58-point pace and had a solid 52.8 percent expected goals rate. That's decent for a second-line center, and if Staal can get back to that range, he really bolsters the Canadiens down the middle. With the team already having a trifecta of Nick Suzuki, Phillip Danault and Jesperi Kotkaniemi, Staal is a real luxury addition. Of course, that all depends on him getting back to his Wild days. If his play with Buffalo is any indication, there's a chance the 36-year-old veteran is already in a steep decline, unlikely to move the needle much for the Canadiens. He's been a below replacement level player this season (who hasn't on Buffalo?) putting up a 47.7 percent expected goals rate, while unable to generate any semblance of actual offense. Staal has just 10 points in 32 games, and the Sabres scored 1.12 goals-per-60 with him on the ice.

Then again, his expected goals for per 60 was the second-highest on the team, and Montreal may be able to count on positive regression when Staal joins the team. His on-ice shooting percentage of 3.8 percent is well below his career norm and nearly three times lower than where he was last season. If that reverts, Staal can instantly become much more productive. Couple that with a better ability to drive play further down the lineup

and Staal becomes a very interesting depth piece for the Canadiens. I'm not sure it'll work, but it's absolutely worth a shot, especially at the price. He seems like a great fit for how the team is built too.

Grade: B

#### Buffalo Sabres

Custance: This isn't a bad return for Buffalo GM Kevyn Adams, who certainly has his work cut out for him. An absolute home run for Staal is a second-round pick and that just wasn't going to happen with his production level, even with his league-wide respect.

To get two picks was about as good as it was going to get.

"Seems like a lot to give up," texted an Eastern Conference executive of the price Montreal paid. "Obviously under pressure in Montreal."

Not to overanalyze the inclusion of the fifth-round pick (that's what we do here!) but there were two schools of thought on how it ended up in this deal.

One source suggested that it was the price of salary retention. Montreal is squeezed against the cap. Enough so that GM Marc Bergevin suggested his deals would need to be dollar in, dollar out at this point.

"(I'm) assuming the 50 percent retention was the fifth-round pick add," texted an executive.

Another thought was that it was the price of doing business this far out from the deadline.

"If this deal was done on (April) 11th or 12th, you're looking at a third-rounder," said an executive.

Grade: B

Luszczyszyn: It's a real shame Buffalo's season has turned out the way it has because it's sullied any trade value for its best assets. Staal was still a decently valuable player when the Sabres acquired him in the offseason, coming off a year where he scored 47 points in 66 games, while being a positive possession driver. He's been anything but this year and that's reflected in his trade return. At Montreal's range that would equate to roughly 0.7 wins (over the pick's first seven years) for the third and 0.2 wins for the fifth. That's a fine haul for what Staal is now, but fairly light for what he could be given his past value. A better season in Buffalo could've put him in second-round pick range, especially with how thin the center market is.

Grade: C

## **Sabres open for business: Eric Staal to Montreal is first of what should be many moves this trade season**

By John Vogl

The Athletic

March 26, 2021

The Sabres' trade for Eric Staal in September was their first shocker of the offseason. Their trade of Staal on Friday caught no one by surprise.

The Sabres know what's coming.

"Nobody's naive here," right wing Kyle Okposo said. "Everybody knows what's going on and the situation that we're in. We know that there's going to be changes coming."

General manager Kevyn Adams made the first of what should be many deals by sending Staal to Montreal for third- and fifth-round picks in this year's draft. The Sabres also retained half of Staal's \$3.25 million salary, keeping \$1.625 million on their salary cap.

The last nugget is the most positive sign from the move.

The subterranean Sabres need to do everything in their power to move their pending unrestricted free agents for assets. With cap space and actual dollars at a premium this season, Buffalo's willingness to eat money to facilitate deals could be key to getting trades done.

NHL teams can have three retained salaries on their books. Staal is the first for the Sabres, so they can do it two more times. It's an important tool considering the large salaries of trade targets Taylor Hall at \$8 million average annual value and Brandon Montour at \$3.25 million AAV.

Other UFAs include forwards Tobias Rieder and Riley Sheahan and nearly healthy goalie Linus Ullmark. While there's potential for Ullmark to return to Buffalo next season, Adams should be looking to find new homes for everyone else.

"Everybody knows I'm a UFA at the end of the year," Montour said. "Teams could be calling, could not be calling."

If teams aren't calling Adams, he needs to call them. The Staal trade shows the phones are working.

The Sabres would prefer prospects or NHL players in their future trade returns, but they weren't getting bodies for a struggling 36-year-old. Staal finished his Sabres career with three goals, seven assists and a minus-20 rating in 32 games.

Like the team, he's bottomed out since the two-week COVID-19 break in early February. He had no goals, five assists and a minus-17 rating in his final 23 games.

Though he failed to make an impression on the ice, he did make friends in the dressing room.

"You can see his passion," Montour said. "Even in his down times here, he always came in with a positive mindset, was always a great guy to even the younger guys onward."

The Sabres expected so much more when they plucked Staal from Minnesota in September. Adams played with the 17-year veteran in Carolina, winning a Stanley Cup together in 2006. Staal had 19 goals and 47 points in 66 games with the Wild last year, so Adams figured there was plenty of game left.

Giving up Marcus Johansson was a small price to pay at the time. The Sabres had turned the solid winger into an overmatched center, and Staal seemed better suited to back up Jack Eichel as the No. 2 center, igniting flickers of hope in Buffalo. When Hall climbed aboard as a free agent in October, the flame was lit.

But as the organization burned to the ground with a last-place showing and fired coach, Adams needed to start dealing.

Staal had control over his destination. He possesses a limited no-trade clause that features 10 teams he could decline. Montreal was on the list, but the center waived the clause and accepted the deal.

Adams will need similar help from Hall. The winger has a full no-movement clause and can squash any deal. But Hall has made it clear he's willing to move on.

Even if the Sabres retain salary in Hall's trade, too, it's helping their bottom line. They've got eight players hurt — forwards Eichel, Okposo, Zemgus Girgensons, Rasmus Asplund and Rieder, defensemen Jake McCabe and Will Borgen, plus Ullmark — so they've needed a steady stream of replacements.

Those recalls have put them over the salary cap, according to CapFriendly. They've had to place Girgensons and Ullmark on long-term injured reserve, which eats into their end-of-year bonus money. Rasmus Dahlin and Dylan Cozens won't hit their max bonuses of \$2.85 million and \$850,000, but Buffalo wants to end its use of LTIR and start saving bonus money again.

A few more trades will make that happen. They're coming.

## **Eric Staal doesn't want to revisit past with Sabres: 'Put that behind me'**

By Bill Hoppe  
Olean Times Herald  
March 28, 2021

Eric Staal was hardly interested in revisiting his rough 32-game tenure in Buffalo and explaining the hapless Sabres' struggles.

Staal, 36, left the NHL's laughingstock on Friday in the midst of a stunning 17-game winless skid and a personal 23-game goal drought.

So can you blame the veteran center, one of the league's most decorated players, for wanting to forget about a tumultuous two months and concentrate on his new opportunity with the Montreal Canadiens?

"The good part for me, right now, is I don't really need to explain," Staal, who was traded for the second time in seven months, said on a Zoom call Sunday. "I can kind of put that behind me and focus on what I can do for the Montreal Canadiens, which is what I'm going to try to do.

"Obviously, it has been a very difficult season for the Sabres and for me personally there. I think there's a lot of contributing factors. I mean, I'm not going to lay them all out."

But Staal offered a bit more later in the virtual news conference, saying the Sabres never recovered from their two-week COVID-19 pause early last month.

"There were so many hurdles, so many things that just didn't line up the way we had in mind or had envisioned," he said. "The reality is we started OK. We had an up-and-down kind of first two weeks or so. We were kind of finding our game, filling our roles and then we got hit by COVID. It went through our room like wildfire and it wasn't great."

Seven Sabres and former coach Ralph Krueger, who was fired March 17, tested positive for COVID-19. The virus hit defenseman Rasmus Ristolainen so hard he struggled to walk up the stairs in his home.

"Two weeks of guys battling that and a couple guys battling it pretty hard, it was difficult," Staal said. "And we kind of after that, when we came back, never found any footing, and then injuries started to mount and in that division, when you're playing teams that don't beat themselves, it's difficult.

"And we just didn't have enough in the locker room to be able to counteract that and manage that properly. It got tougher and tougher, obviously."

When interim Sabres coach Don Granato self-isolated in his hotel room and missed Thursday's 4-0 road loss to the Pittsburgh Penguins, he watched a drained Staal give an intermission interview.

"He looked exhausted and depleted," said Granato, who briefly entered the NHL's COVID-19 protocol. "I can tell you behind the scenes, he's the exact opposite. He was amazing, keeping guys up on the bench through this adversity and challenge, in the locker room saying the right things. For me as a coach, certainly as a new coach, I could not have asked for a more supportive veteran-experience player around."

Despite Staal's poor season – he has compiled three goals, 10 points and an awful minus-20 rating – he fetched the Sabres third- and fifth-round picks in 2021. He had the Canadiens on his 10-team no-trade list, but because the Canadian government shortened the quarantine period from 14 to seven days, he approved the trade.

Staal, who was teammates with Sabres general manager Kevyn Adams early in his career, said his friend will "do the best he can to recharge that organization."

"But there's a ways to go," he said. "For me, having this chance to be a Montreal Canadien and join this team with a lot of great players, a lot of great talent is exciting for me."

The Sabres host the Philadelphia Flyers on Monday at KeyBank Center, the start of a four-game home stand.

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With Staal in Montreal and captain Jack Eichel sidelined indefinitely by an upper-body injury, the Sabres have a dearth of center talent.

Jean-Sebastien Dea, who hadn't played an NHL game since Feb. 4, 2020, started Saturday afternoon's 3-2 loss to the Boston Bruins as the No. 1 center between Taylor Hall and Sam Reinhart.

Later in the first period, Granato promoted Casey Mittelstadt, a third- or fourth-line winger nearly all season, to pivot the top line.

Why did Mittelstadt earn the promotion?

"You're reading body language on the bench and feeling vibes, and he had one real good shift," Granato said following the game.

In addition to trading Staal, the Sabres lost four forwards to injuries or illness last week. Winger Kyle Okposo, however, returned Saturday.

The changing lineup has forced Granato to cobble together lines based on his reactions from the bench.

"So you're looking in a game like (Saturday's) to see, 'OK, who may have a little bit more tonight and what might be the chemistry?'" Granato said.

Sabres rookie Dylan Cozens also skated at center, his natural position, some of Saturday's game. He played right wing Thursday.

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The Sabres on Sunday sent goalie Ukko-Pekka Luukkonen and forward Brett Murray from the taxi squad back to the Rochester Americans.

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Buffalo's March 20 home game with Boston that was postponed because of the Bruins' COVID-19 problems has been rescheduled for April 20 at 7 p.m.

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The Sabres had Sunday off.

## **Goalie Linus Ullmark looks strong in return, offers Sabres some hope**

By Bill Hoppe

Olean Times Herald

March 27, 2021

Following a 15-game absence, Buffalo Sabres goalie Linus Ullmark acknowledged he felt a little awkward in the beginning of Saturday afternoon's 3-2 loss.

Then Ullmark, 27, quickly settled in, showcasing his regular strong form while making 33 saves against the Boston Bruins.

"After a couple shots you're in it, like you never left," Ullmark said on a Zoom call after the Sabres' 17th consecutive loss.

The Sabres wish Ullmark, who suffered a lower-body injury Feb. 25, never left the lineup. They imploded without their No. 1 goalie.

Their myriad problems, of course, extend far beyond goaltending. But it's safe to say if Ullmark had remained healthy, they would've won at least a few times over the past month.

"He showed what he can do," Sabres winger Kyle Okposo said of Ullmark's performance Saturday. "I mean, he made a ton of good saves, he was very calm back there and he played great. He's the type of goalie that can give you a chance to win every night."

Ullmark has registered a .918 save percentage in 13 outings this season. Of the Swede's three replacements – Carter Hutton, Jonas Johansson and Dustin Tokarski – only Tokarski has registered a save percentage of .890.

Tokarski looked solid playing behind a porous defense three times earlier last week.

Ullmark will likely carry the load over the final six weeks this season, playing as many games as he can handle.

As Ullmark watched the Sabres fall apart from the sidelines, he said he did not want to rush back into the lineup. He started practicing again Tuesday.

"I have full faith in the medical team and in me, myself and everyone that's been helping me out during this process, and I knew we'd take all the necessary steps and we'd check off all the boxes that need to be checked off," he said. "I would come back when I was ready. (Friday) after that practice it felt like I was ready to play."

Following a strong 40 minutes, the Sabres fell apart late, allowing two third-period goals. Charlie McAvoy and Craig Smith scored for the Bruins, capitalizing after the Sabres showcased some poor defensive awareness.

Still, the Sabres, who have looked downright awful defensively over their marathon skid, have started to clean things up a bit.

"I'm glad he came back (today) because I felt as a progression, we're starting to give our goaltenders more consistent shots, more consistent plays against," interim Sabres coach Don Granato said. "I think ... there was consistency with what we were denying and consistency with what was allowed much more than we saw maybe two nights ago or two games ago in Pittsburgh."

"I think you guys that watched could kind of sense two games ago it was out of control, (then) a little better control and then (today) again the shots were more of the same, from the same areas, so there's more consistency. Much easier for a goaltender."

## **Sabres play best game in weeks, still lose 17th straight**

By Bill Hoppe  
Olean Times Herald  
March 27, 2021

The Buffalo Sabres performed much better in their 17th consecutive loss than they had in the previous 16.

They took an early lead Saturday afternoon – winger Sam Reinhart scored their first power-play goal in 16 games just 2:01 into the game – and later snatched it back after the Boston Bruins tied it.

Having been shut out seven times this season, simply scoring a goal or two can be measured as progress. That's the Sabres' current sorry state.

For the just the third time in their streak, the Sabres led after two periods. Of course, they wilted late, allowing two third-period goals and losing 3-2 inside TD Garden.

They generated just three shots on goal in the third period, including zero during a stretch of more than 15 minutes.

"We were not as aggressive as we needed to be collectively," interim coach Don Granato said on a Zoom call after the Sabres' four-game road trip ended. "We just weren't moving as a group of five well enough. We did that, we got into a rhythm to start the game and in the third ... we were not moving as a unit. They elevated their intensity, we didn't elevate as we should have."

At this point, the Sabres have nothing to lose. So why play so tentatively with the game on the line? They've done it before, having registered zero shots in the third period of their 3-1 loss to the New York Islanders on Feb. 15.

After defenseman Colin Miller pumped a shot on Bruins goalie Dan Vladar 3:55 into the third period, winger Victor Olofsson recorded the Sabres' next one at 19:49.

"Right now, it's a little bit of a confidence thing," said winger Kyle Okposo, who scored the Sabres' second goal. "We've obviously been struggling to score all year and we know that it's a time that we have to score and I just think we're gripping it a little bit too tight when we shouldn't. Pressure should be off right now."

"Obviously, we have the weight of this, of what's going on, but we shouldn't be squeezing our sticks right now. We should just be playing free, playing the right way, trying to make things happen."

Still, the Sabres need to latch on to any positive developments. For 40 minutes at least, they played tighter defense, limiting the Bruins' opportunities in front of goalie Linus Ullmark, who returned from a lower-body injury after 15-game absence.

"It was a lot better without the puck and I thought we did a good job of kind of eliminating their time and space," Okposo said. "We did a lot of good things tonight, we just weren't able to get the W."

Despite losing 4-0 to the Pittsburgh Penguins on Thursday, Granato said he saw some progress in the Sabres, who carried that into Saturday.

"We felt that (today)," he said. "I think the players felt that. Certainly, it was nice to have Linus back in there and (the game) really came down to the third period. They were hungry. There's a lot of things we can look at in the film and once again make the next step. That's what you take from it."

## **False COVID-19 positives caused Sabres' Don Granato, Matt Ellis to miss game**

By Bill Hoppe

Olean Times Herald

March 27, 2021

When interim Buffalo Sabres Don Granato learned on Thursday his COVID-19 test had returned positive, he said he was in disbelief.

"Quite honestly, I didn't believe it in the sense of, I said, 'It's not right, it didn't feel right,'" Granato, who received his second vaccination last week, said on a Zoom call this morning. "And I say that because I believe the protocols that have been in place have given me a level of confidence that I didn't feel panic at all."

It turns out Granato and assistant coach Matt Ellis, who also entered the NHL's COVID-19 protocol, had false positives.

They had to self-quarantine and watch Thursday's 4-0 road loss to the Pittsburgh Penguins from their hotel rooms. Sabres general manager Kevyn Adams and Rochester Americans coach Seth Appert filled in for them.

Granato and Ellis will be back behind the bench this afternoon against the Boston Bruins at TD Garden.

Granato and Ellis couldn't take the team's charter flight following Thursday's game because they needed more negative results. Instead, they returned to Buffalo that night and took cars to Boston on Friday.

"So heck of a day, but I got a lot of work time on the laptop and obviously got to see our team from a different vantage point the other night," Granato said. "I'm looking forward to being back with them today, I'm certainly excited about that."

Granato was hospitalized with severe pneumonia early last season and missed nearly two months.

"People are aware that I did have a pretty good health scare a year ago, there are some unknowns, certainly, with this virus for everybody," he said. "And for me, I wanted to reduce any risk I could. I've had no anxiety coming to work at any point this year, and again, it's because of the protocols that are in place, how serious people around our organization take it, so that's been very comforting for me. And this really didn't feel uncomfortable yesterday."

In other news, Granato, who Sabres have lost 16 straight games, said goalie Linus Ullmark will start his first game this afternoon since suffering a lower-body injury Feb. 25.

The Sabres this morning activated Ullmark and winger Kyle Okposo from injured reserve and recalled forward J-S Dea from the taxi squad. They also sent goalie Michael Houser and forward C.J. Smith back to the taxi squad.

Okposo missed three games battling an upper-body injury related to his neck. Dea hasn't played in the NHL since last season.

## **After trading Eric Staal, Sabres know more moves coming: 'Nobody's naive'**

By Bill Hoppe

Olean Times Herald

March 27, 2021

Winger Kyle Okposo knows center Eric Staal was likely only the first of several veteran teammates who will be leaving the hapless Buffalo Sabres over the next few weeks.

The Sabres, having lost 16 straight entering this afternoon's road game against the Boston Bruins, are broken and on pace to be historically bad. The NHL's laughingstock needs a massive overhaul, so anyone could be in play before the April 12 trade deadline.

"I mean, nobody's naive here," Okposo said on a Zoom call Friday shortly before the Sabres traded Staal to the Montreal Canadiens. "Everybody knows what's going on with the situation that we're in and we know that there's going to be changes coming. Still doesn't make it any easier."

When word spread before Friday's practice Staal would be dealt, Okposo said he left the TD Garden ice in Boston to wish his friend well.

"He's a character guy," Okposo said. "He's a really good person, he's a good man. He's had a heck of a career to date and he's going to continue to play well. So I wish him nothing but the best."

The Canadiens gave the Sabres third- and fifth-round picks for Staal, 36, a decorated veteran who has struggled nearly all season. The Sabres will retain \$1.625 million of his \$3 million salary. Staal can become an unrestricted free agent following the season.

Staal approved the deal because Montreal was on his 10-team no-trade list, according to The Athletic's Pierre LeBrun.

Right now, anyone entering Canada from the United States must serve a 14-day quarantine because of the COVID-19 pandemic. The Canadian government, however, is reportedly set to shorten that to seven days for athletes.

The Canadiens' activities are paused until at least Tuesday because of COVID-19, so Staal could only miss minimal time.

Staal's arrival from the Minnesota Wild on Sept. 16 in exchange for forward Marcus Johansson generated much-needed excitement within the Sabres' disgruntled fan base.

In Staal, rookie general manager Kevyn Adams acquired one of the NHL's most decorated and respected players and found a No. 2 center the team sorely needed to play behind captain Jack Eichel.

Adams' first significant move helped him establish credibility. Staal won the Stanley Cup as Adams' teammate with the Carolina Hurricanes in 2006 and an Olympic gold medal with Team Canada in 2010.

In his first 16 NHL seasons, Staal amassed more than 400 goals and 1,000 points. He also showcased remarkable longevity, consistently scoring 20 or more goals into his mid-30s.

But Staal has endured a tough season, compiling just three goals, 10 points and an awful minus-20 rating in 32 outings. He has a 23-game goal drought, having last scored Jan. 30.

His wife and children also stayed home in Minnesota this season.

"It's been challenging," Staal said last week of his season. "It hasn't been good enough. I haven't been good enough. Clearly, in my mind, I had envisioned things differently coming here and it just hasn't come to fruition and it hasn't lived up to those thoughts. I think that's for sure been challenging, that's been difficult, but that's still no excuse. It doesn't matter."

Shortly before the trade was completed, Sabres defenseman Brandon Montour said playing with Staal had "been unbelievable."

"You can see his passion," Montour said Friday. "Obviously, he's experienced everything he can as a player and all the success he's had, but even in these down times here he always came in with a positive mindset, was always a great guy, I think, to even just the young guys onward."

"Having him around the locker room and seeing his face just around the hotel, practices, games, it's great to have him here, for sure."

In a statement, Adams said Staal's professionalism "was felt by everybody in our organization from top to bottom."

"I know his leadership and demeanor were valued by our players, coaches and staff, and Eric's impact on our young players is obvious," he said. "It was a pleasure to be around Eric again and I wish him and his family all the best."

The Sabres have eight other regulars who can become unrestricted free agents following the season: Montour, defenseman Matt Irwin and Jake McCabe; goalies Carter Hutton and Linus Ullmark; and forwards Taylor Hall, Tobias Rieder and Riley Sheahan.

Hall, 29, and Montour, 26, figure to draw the most interest. Hall, the 2017-18 NHL MVP, has compiled just two goals, 17 points and a wretched minus-17 rating in 32 games this season. Still, if the Sabres are willing to absorb some of the money on his one-year, \$8 million contract, he could fetch a strong asset.

Hall, who has a no-movement clause, said following Thursday's 4-0 loss to the Pittsburgh Penguins he would listen if Adams told him another team was interested in him.

Montour, a puck-moving defenseman, hasn't showcased much growth since the Sabres acquired him two years ago. The Sabres traded a first-round pick and defense prospect Brendan Guhle to the Anaheim Ducks in exchange for Montour.

## **Don Granato, Matt Ellis clear COVID-19 protocols, join Sabres in Boston**

By Bill Hoppe  
Olean Times Herald  
March 27, 2021

Interim coach Don Granato and assistant Matt Ellis cleared the NHL's COVID-19 protocol and joined the Buffalo Sabres following Friday's practice in Boston.

The Sabres announced shortly before Thursday's 4-0 road loss to the Pittsburgh Penguins that Granato, 53, and Ellis, 39, had entered protocol and were self-isolating.

General manager Kevyn Adams filled in for Granato and the Sabres also promoted Rochester Americans coach Seth Appert to fill in for Ellis.

The Sabres, who have lost 16 straight games, play the Bruins this afternoon.

Appert led Friday's Sabres practice in Boston, according to The Buffalo News. Meanwhile, in Rochester, Amerks assistants Adam Mair and Mike Weber shared the coaching duties against the Syracuse Crunch.

The Amerks hadn't played since March 10 because of COVID-19 postponements.

The AHL announced Friday that Sunday's Amerks home game has been postponed because of "COVID-19 protocols affecting the Utica Comets."

No makeup date has been announced.

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Sabres winger Kyle Okposo, who has a scary history of concussions, said the upper-body injury he has been battling is related to his neck.

"Kind of some of those similar symptoms that have popped up in the past," Okposo said on a Zoom call Friday after returning to practice in Boston.

Okposo said he "stayed out in front" of his problem.

"I got it worked on and was able to get better quickly," he said.

Okposo will likely miss his fourth straight game this afternoon. The American said he was possibly injured in practice.

"I was alarmed, for sure," he said. "It's something that has been part of my life here over the past number of years and something that you I probably will continue to deal with. But I have a great team here in place and great people around me to work with that I know what to do and how to get through it."

Sabres winger Tage Thompson (illness) also practiced Friday but likely won't face the Bruins. Thompson skated on the fifth line with Okposo, according to The Buffalo News.

## **Sabres trade Eric Staal to Canadiens**

By Bill Hoppe  
Olean Times Herald  
March 26, 2021

The Buffalo Sabres this afternoon traded veteran center Eric Staal to the Montreal Canadiens in exchange for third- and fifth-round picks in 2021.

The Sabres will retain \$1.625 million of Staal's \$3 million salary. Staal, 36, did not practice with the Sabres today in Boston.

Following the session, Sabres winger Kyle Okposo said he said goodbye to Staal.

"Found out about Staalsy right before practice and just got off the ice to go wish him well," Okposo said on a Zoom call. "He's a character guy. He's a really good person, he's a good man. He's had a heck of a career to date and he's going to continue to play well. So I wish him nothing but the best."

Staal has struggled this season, compiling three goals, 10 points and a minus-20 rating in 32 games for the hapless Sabres, who have lost 16 straight contests. He has a 23-game goal drought, having last scored Jan. 30.

"It's been challenging," Staal said last week of his season. "It hasn't been good enough. I haven't been good enough. Clearly, in my mind, I had envisioned things differently coming here and it just hasn't come to fruition and it hasn't lived up to those thoughts. I think that's for sure been challenging, that's been difficult, but that's still no excuse. It doesn't matter.

"I have more pride in myself, what I can do in this league, what I can do on the ice and at the end of the day, it hasn't been good enough for me personally and obviously, clearly it hasn't been good enough for our team either. So I know I take my fair share of responsibility for that."

Staal's acquisition from the Minnesota Wild on Sept. 16 in exchange for forward Marcus Johansson generated excitement. In Staal, rookie general manager Kevyn Adams brought in one of the NHL's most decorated players and found a No. 2 center the Sabres sorely needed to play behind Jack Eichel.

But after a solid start, Staal and the Sabres started struggling. Right now, they have the NHL's worst record, an awful 6-22-4 mark.

Adams knows Staal well, having won the Stanley Cup as teammates with the Carolina Hurricanes in 2006.

"The professionalism Eric displayed during his time with the Sabres was felt by everybody in our organization from top to bottom," Adams said in a statement. "I know his leadership and demeanor were valued by our players, coaches and staff, and Eric's impact on our young players is obvious. It was a pleasure to be around Eric again and I wish him and his family all the best."

## **Sabres, Bruins to make up postponed game on April 20th**

By Adam Unger

WKBW

March 28, 2021

BUFFALO, N.Y. (WKBW) — The previously postponed Sabres game against the Bruins has been rescheduled. Boston will make up the game in Buffalo on April 20th.

With the update to their schedule, Buffalo will see the Bruins three times in four days; the two teams will play at KeyBank Center on April 20th, 22nd, and 23rd.

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None of Buffalo's other games are impacted by the schedule change. The Bruins, on the other hand, had three more changes announced by the league on Sunday evening.

As a result of the changes, the Sabres will have to play five games in a seven-day stretch for the second time this season.

## **Sabres fall short 3-2 to Bruins in Ullmark's return**

By Adam Unger

WKBW

March 27, 2021

BOSTON (WKBW) — Several returns both to the ice and to the bench weren't enough for the Sabres' winless streak to end. Buffalo lost to the Boston Bruins 3-2 on Saturday afternoon.

Kyle Okposo scored in his first game back from injured reserve to give Buffalo a 2-1 lead in the second period. The Sabres saw the lead vanish in the third, though.

Boston found the back of the net twice in the final frame; up to that point Linus Ullmark had allowed only one goal through the first 40 minutes. He made 33 saves in his first game back since February 23rd.

Ullmark's last full game between the pipes was also Buffalo's last win. They haven't picked up two points in a single outing in over a month; Saturday's loss marks the 17th game of Buffalo's skid. The Sabres host the Philadelphia Flyers on Monday.

## **Sabres trade Eric Staal to Canadiens for two 2021 draft picks**

By Adam Unger

WKBW

March 26, 2021

BUFFALO, N.Y. (WKBW) — Eric Staal is off to Montreal. The Buffalo Sabres have dealt the veteran center to the Canadiens for 3rd and 5th round draft picks in the 2021 NHL Draft.

Staal had three goals and seven assists in 32 games played with Buffalo. He was acquired from the Minnesota Wild this past off-season in exchange for Marcus Johansson.

His contract, originally signed with Minnesota, was set to expire after the 2021 season. The Sabres' next game is against the Boston Bruins on Saturday.

## **Sabres to host fans at 4 games in April**

By Nick Veronica

WIVB

March 26, 2021

Sabres fans have four chances to see their team play at home this season.

The team announced Friday that a limited number of fans will be allowed at four games during the remainder of the season, all taking place on Fridays or Saturdays in April. The games are:

Saturday, April 3 vs. New York Rangers, 7 p.m.

Friday, April 9 vs. Washington Capitals, 7 p.m.

Saturday, April 17 vs. Pittsburgh Penguins, 3 p.m.

Friday, April 23 vs. Boston Bruins, 7 p.m.

Tickets for all games go on sale Monday, March 29. Season-ticket holders have an exclusive window starting at 10 a.m. while the general public has access beginning at 2 p.m.

All fans will need to show proof of a negative COVID-19 test taken within 72 hours of the game or proof they have been fully vaccinated for at least 14 days.

Fans are required to pay for their own COVID testing, but the team has partnered with Quest Diagnostics to offer antigen testing for \$30 with test results provided in 30 minutes. Additional info can be found at [Sabres.com/FAQ](https://www.sabres.com/FAQ).

The Sabres planned to host fans once earlier this season, but the game was postponed after the visiting Boston Bruins ran into COVID issues. Fans were refunded for the price of their ticket and offered a ticket to a game next season. The team also hosted 700 frontline healthcare workers for a game earlier this month.

The Sabres are in last place in the NHL with a 6-22-4 record.

## **Sabres trade Eric Staal to Montreal for draft picks**

By Paul Stockman

WIVB

March 26, 2021

BUFFALO, N.Y. (WIVB) – Eric Staal’s time in Buffalo was short-lived. Six months after the Sabres acquired the forward, they’ve shipped him off to Montreal in exchange for a 3rd- and a 5th-round draft pick in 2021, the Canadiens announced.

His first, and only, season in Buffalo, Staal has 10 points in 32 games. He’s scored three goals and has seven assists. General Manager Kevyn Adams sent out a statement regarding Staal’s trade.

“The professionalism Eric displayed during his time with the Sabres was felt by everybody in our organization from top to bottom,” the statement said. “I know his leadership and demeanor were valued by our players, coaches and staff, and Eric’s impact on our young players is obvious. It was a pleasure to be around Eric again and I wish him and his family all the best.”

With the season they’re having, many expected the Sabres to make some sort of move before the NHL’s trade deadline. Teammate Kyle Okposo didn’t sound surprised at all when he heard initial trade rumors for Staal.

Sabres lose again for not-so-sweet 16

“It’s pretty obvious. Nobody’s naive here,” Okposo said. “Everybody knows what’s going on with the situation we’re in and we know that there’s going to be changes coming. It doesn’t make it any easier.”

Even though nothing had been finalized, Okposo said he still spoke to Staal Thursday when they heard about the news of the potential trade.

“Found out about [Staal] right before practice and just got off the ice to go wish him well,” Okposo said. “He’s a character guy. He’s a really good person, he’s a good man, he’s had a heck of a career to date and he’s going to continue to play well. Wish him nothing but the best.”

The Sabres acquired Staal this past offseason in a trade with the Minnesota Wild in exchange for Marcus Johansson.

## **Sabres coaches Don Granato, Matt Ellis cleared from COVID-19 protocol**

By Nick Veronica

WIVB

March 26, 2021

Buffalo Sabres interim head coach Don Granato (left) and assistant coach Matt Ellis behind the bench during the game against the Boston Bruins at KeyBank Center on March 18, 2021 in Buffalo, New York. (Photo by Kevin Hoffman/Getty Images)

Sabres interim head coach Don Granato and interim assistant Matt Ellis were cleared from COVID-19 protocol Friday, a day after general manager Kevyn Adams had to coach the team while bench bosses were sidelined.

Granato and Ellis will join the team in Boston and are set to return to coaching duties for Saturday's 1 p.m. game against the Bruins.

Rochester Americans coach Seth Appert traveled to Pittsburgh to join the team Thursday evening after the Sabres announced Granato and Ellis were placed in the protocol, but he was not scheduled to arrive in time to coach the game. Appert led practice Friday afternoon, but it seems his services will no longer be needed, as Granato and Ellis were cleared to return less than 24 hours later.

The Sabres lost to the Penguins 4-0 with Adams behind the bench, stretching their franchise-record winless run to 16 consecutive games. The team has been shut out in more games (seven) than it has won (six).

No players on the team were required to enter COVID protocol along with their coaches on Thursday despite having a game on Wednesday night.

## **Staal shares what went wrong with Sabres following trade**

By Julianne Pelusi

WGRZ

March 28, 2021

MONTREAL, QC — Eric Staal was introduced to the Montreal media on Sunday, leaving behind a Sabres team on a 17-game winless streak and joining a Canadiens team in the NHL's North Division's playoff conversation.

"I just want to just want to win," Staal said. "I want to be out there and win, and be competitive, and try and help our group win games, where they're wherever that is in the lineup. I will do what I can. Now I feel like, you know, I've got some game left in me, then I can be a contributor."

The contributions on the ice in Buffalo weren't what the Sabres were hoping for after the team brought in Staal from Minnesota to center the second line and give rookie Dylan Cozens some time to develop on the wing.

The veteran forward has scored just three goals over 32 games so far this season, but interim coach Don Granato said Staal's impact is more long-lasting.

"He was amazing. Keeping guys up on the bench through this adversity and challenge [and] in the locker room, saying the right thing," Granato said. "For me as a coach, certainly as a new coach, I could not have asked for a more supportive veteran experienced player. ..."

"That's sad to see him go, but I'm excited for him as a, you know, to have that opportunity because he's given us what he could here."

When asked what went wrong in Buffalo, Staal said, "There were so many hurdles. There were so many things that just didn't line up the way that we had in mind or had envisioned. ... The reality is we started OK. We had an up and down kind of first two weeks or so. We were kind of finding our game and filling our roles, and then we got hit with COVID. ... It went through our room like like wildfire, and it wasn't great."

The Sabres got two 2021 draft picks in the third and fifth rounds in exchange for the centerman. As 2 On Your Side's Sabres analyst Paul Hamilton told Julianne Pelusi after the trade, it was probably the best Kevyn Adams could get, given Staal's low on-ice productivity this season.

"I think Adams knew the best offer was going to be Montreal, wants to get squared away [since] they can't make any more moves. They're at the salary cap, and that's with only having to pay half of Staal's salary, so they wanted to get him in there, get quarantined, and have them out on the ice with them for a month," Hamilton said.

"So [Adams] had a good sense of it. Usually if you keep salary, you should be able to do better than a third and fifth [round pick], but with the way Staal's played this year, I think that's pretty much what [Adams] was going to get."

## **Sullivan: Pegulas' 'economic' approach has Sabres floundering**

By Jerry Sullivan

Niagara Gazette

March 26, 2021

After the latest failed attempt at a win, Taylor Hall suggested it had been one of the Sabres' better efforts in recent weeks. The guys in the TV studio, always ready to see the bright side of things, agreed the team had displayed an encouraging edge.

That's how bad it's become with this team. The Sabres lost to the Penguins on Thursday night, 4-0. They extended their winless streak to 16 games, the most by an NHL team since the league went to shootouts 15 years ago. They've been outscored by 43 goals in that span, turning the 5-2 loss into an art form.

And yet their suffering fans are supposed to derive some solace from the fact that they didn't utterly disgrace themselves, that they actually had sustained stretches of play where they didn't coast around the ice like a bunch of deflated losers.

I guess when you're the worst franchise in professional sports, you have to emphasize the positives. But if there's one thing I've learned from years of observing the Pegulas, it's that they can always manage to make a bad situation worse.

Six years after tanking, they're the worst team in the league by eight points. Anaheim is the only team in the NHL that isn't at least 12 points ahead of the Sabres right now. They're 32 points behind the Islanders in the East after playing 32 games. Wow.

Somehow, they've achieved this with a roster that includes 10 players who were taken in the top 10 of the NHL draft, the most in the league. During the Bills' drought, I used to say you have to work at it to miss the playoffs that many times in a row. I feel the same way about the Sabres these days, that they're masters of their own dysfunction.

You know what they need? Of course you do. They need vision, someone who knows hockey and the league, inside and out, and can come in and show these people how to run a functional sports franchise. Someone who has respect in NHL circles and the ability to identify real winning hockey players.

It could be an actual team president, or a general manager who wasn't simply handed the job because he was on the payroll and wouldn't need big money. Or yes, a head coach who could come in and command respect of the players and the league and the town.

But does anyone believe that the Pegulas will do the right thing here? That's one of the Sabres' specialties, making moves for the wrong reasons — to save face, or to prop up cronies, or to show the media that no one is going to show them how to run things.

Just 10 months ago, Kim Pegula said they weren't going to fire Jason Botterill and insulted the ticket-buying public by saying "We have a little bit more information than maybe a fan does, some inner workings that we see some positives in."

Then they fired Botterill anyway and installed the unqualified Kevyn Adams as GM. The Pegulas also took a weed whacker through their hockey department and trotted out the new organizational mantra of "Effective, Efficient and Economic."

So much for the inner workings. I imagine the average fan is smart enough to know what's really going on here. After losing a pile of money during the pandemic, the Pegulas decided to operate on the cheap. Which brings us to the next coach.

Word is, they're leaning toward hiring a college coach, likely Nate Lehman of Providence College or Scott Sandelin of Minnesota-Duluth. Adams supposedly knows the college game, which figures since his team has been playing like something out of Atlantic Hockey.

Maybe one of those college guys could turn into the next Scotty Bowman. But it's a weak, small-minded idea for a team in a historic state of disarray. Is this really the time to take a college coach out for a spin, after the failed Ralph Krueger experiment?

Fans and media wanted to give the Pegulas credit for going outside the box with Krueger, as if hiring a guy out of European soccer demonstrated some rare courage and intelligence. Krueger was a known communicator. The Canadian media fawned over him. All he lacked was a real sense of how to coach in the NHL.

All right, so now they bring in a proven guy, right? No, that would cost too much money in the age of "effective, efficient and economic," emphasis on the economic.

It's amazing that anyone would want to work in Buffalo at this point. But there are only so many head jobs, and desperate coaches always believe they have what it takes to lift a foundering franchise back to respectability.

Bruce Boudreau would come. He's never won the Stanley Cup, but he has over 500 wins in the NHL. You say he's old. I say he's 12 years younger than Joe Biden, who is settling nicely into his new job.

Gerard Gallant is out there. So is Claude Julien, who won the Cup with the Bruins. John Tortorella, who also has a Cup on his resume, appears to be on thin ice in Columbus and could become available. How about "Torts" coming back to Buffalo, where his NHL career began under Rick Dudley?

Of course, all those guys would cost big money — something in the five-year, \$25 million range. You know, the kind of deal they gifted to Rex Ryan a few years back. I suspect Pegula is losing too much money and paying too many people not to work to throw a big guaranteed contract at a veteran coach with leverage.

Instead, he'll send Adams on what TSN's Bob McKenzie calls a "massive search" for a new head coach and an assistant GM. A real GM would be more like it, seeing how Adams is more suited to be the assistant behind a GM with an actual portfolio.

How "massive" a coach search can we expect if the owners are determined to do it on the cheap? Maybe Pegula can hit the lottery, the way he did when he handed the Bills over to an unproven Sean McDermott a few years back. But the Sabres are in too deep a mess to have people learning on the job.

Things have surely devolved over the last 10 years. Pegula came to town crying at the sight of a Sabres legend and vowing that the team's sole reason for existing was to win the Stanley Cup. Money wasn't going to be an impediment, remember? He could always frack another oil well if he needed some ready cash.

Now, he looks like another sad, small-time owner, looking to save a buck. Ten years after riding into town with his wallet flashing, Pegula rules over the biggest joke in hockey, a team that can lose 4-0 and have it seem like progress.

## **Sabres fall to Bruins, extend record skid to 17**

By Matt Kalman

NHL.com

March 27, 2021

BOSTON -- The Buffalo Sabres allowed two third-period goals and lost a 17th straight game, 3-2 to the Boston Bruins at TD Garden on Saturday.

The Sabres are 0-15-2 since Feb. 23 and extended their NHL shootout-era record for the longest stretch without a victory. The shootout was implemented in the 2005-06 season, eliminating ties.

Linus Ullmark made 33 saves in his return after missing 15 games because of a lower-body injury for Buffalo (6-23-4).

"We obviously played a good game, a good hockey game," Sabres forward Kyle Okposo said. "A couple bounces end up in the back of our net and I just didn't think we had enough looks in the third period there to really try and put them away and end the game. We've just got to find a way to keep pushing for offense.

"But it was a lot better without the puck, and I thought we did a good job to kind of limit their time and space and we did a lot of good things tonight, we just weren't able to get the W."

Boston (17-8-5) extended its point streak to four games (3-0-1).

The Bruins trailed 2-1 heading into the third period before Nick Ritchie tied it 2-2 at 5:22 and Craig Smith scored at 16:10 for a 3-2 lead.

Ritchie scored on a tap-in after Charlie McAvoy circled the net and passed to the front. The puck deflected off Buffalo defenseman Rasmus Ristolainen to Ritchie.

"I was just trying to use kind of my momentum to just get skating. I know they're a man-on-man team, so I was trying to get a step," McAvoy said. "I was actually looking for [Smith] through a seam there, and then we were fortunate enough to get a bounce. But when guys are going to the net all game and working hard to get to those dirty areas, it's nice to see them get rewarded."

Smith also scored from near the front of the net.

"Some of the focus was put on getting to the front of the net and being a little bit more hungry," he said. "And you see [Ritchie] banging one in there in the third and guys just creating a little havoc in front. It was just a lucky puck bouncing out."

Sam Reinhart gave Buffalo a 1-0 lead by stealing goalie Dan Vladar's pass and shooting it into the open net during a power play at 2:01 of the first period.

Vladar made 25 saves in his second NHL start.

"He responded well [after allowing the first goal]," Bruins coach Bruce Cassidy said. "You don't know with a young guy if it'll sort of get in his head or [he'll] park it. I thought he did a good job parking it, made some good saves for us. I don't think he had to make a ton of stops in there, but he made the ones you're supposed to."

Matt Grzelcyk's goal from the blue line during a delayed penalty against Buffalo made it 1-1 at 11:41 of the second period.

Okposo, who returned after missing three game because of an upper-body injury, put the Sabres ahead 2-1 at 14:12 on a rebound of a Henri Jokiharju shot.

"It doesn't really matter how you lose the game," Ullmark said. "You know it's unfortunate that we got some unlucky bounces and some calls against us there at the end when we're pushing for that third goal. There's nothing to say about that now, you've got to go home, recharge and then come back stronger for the next one."

NOTES: Bruins forward Brad Marchand missed the game because he entered the NHL COVID-19 protocol Saturday morning. He leads the Bruins with 34 points (12 goals, 22 assists). ... Sabres coach Don Granato and assistant Matt Ellis returned from COVID-19 protocol. General manager Kevyn Adams coached the Sabres in a 4-0 loss to the Pittsburgh Penguins on Thursday. ... Bruins forward Zach Senyshyn returned after missing five games with an upper-body injury. He had one shot on goal in 11:50 of ice time. ... Bruins defenseman Jeremy Lauzon returned after missing 12 games because of a fractured hand. He blocked three shots and had one shot on goal in 18:32. ... Sabres defenseman Jacob Bryson left the game with 3:30 remaining in the third period after a collision with Boston's David Pastrnak. ... Boston defenseman John Moore will be out for the season after having hip surgery March 22. The expected recovery time is 5-6 months. ... Buffalo forward Steven Fogarty scored his first NHL point in his 21st game with an assist on Okposo's goal.

## **Granato coaches Sabres vs. Bruins after clearing NHL COVID-19 protocol**

NHL.com

March 27, 2021

Buffalo Sabres coach Don Granato and assistant Matt Ellis cleared NHL COVID-19 protocol and were behind the Sabres bench for their game 3-2 loss at the Boston Bruins on Saturday.

Granato and Ellis were not available for a 4-0 loss at the Pittsburgh Penguins on Thursday after entering protocol earlier in the day and then missing practice Friday.

Linus Ullmark also returned for the Sabres on Saturday. The goalie had not played since sustaining a lower-body injury in a 4-3 overtime loss to the New Jersey Devils on Feb. 25.

The Sabres (6-23-4) had their game against the Bruins last Saturday postponed due to protocol. They also had six games postponed and their facilities closed from Feb. 2-13, and had nine players on the protocol list during that span.

"Obviously, we've experienced it a few times now with positive cases," defenseman Brandon Montour said. "Obviously those newer faces on the bench, newer roles, with Donnie we're all hoping for the best news for his sake and his health. ... All we're thinking about is the health of them and hopefully they're safe. We're glad everything's on track with that and we'll see them soon.

"Like I said, we've experienced it a few times already. It's a weird year for every team, everybody in the world. Just got to go with the punches and go each day, each time you step on the ice or practice, it's the way it is this year. Whoever's behind the bench or whoever's playing, it's the next man up and that's the best thing you can do right now."

General manager Kevyn Adams coached the Sabres on Thursday.

"There's a different perspective when you're behind the bench," Adams said. "You're feeling the emotions of the game. You're understanding how the players are interacting. You just see things in a little bit of a different way at ice level. So for sure, for me, I learned. [The] downside to that was it was challenging circumstances around."

Adams said Granato and Adams had no symptoms and were "both feeling great. They're both doing good."

The Sabres have lost 17 straight games, extending the NHL record for the shootout era (since 2005-06). Buffalo is 0-5-0 and has been outscored 21-9 since Ralph Krueger was fired as coach March 17.

"You're ready for anything at this point in time," forward Taylor Hall said. "You have to be on your heels. Never know what to expect. We adjust. We were able to have a meeting with all of them beforehand in the morning, so kind of knew what the game plan was and the summation of last game was. So we just went out and played and tried as hard as we could."

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

The New Jersey Devils are the only team the Sabres have defeated since Jan. 28. They are 3-2-1 against the Devils and 0-18-2 against the rest of the MassMutual East Division in that span.

Adams was an assistant under Lindy Ruff with the Sabres from 2011-13. He was a development coach with Buffalo from 2009-11.

Asked about his level of comfort coaching on short notice, he said, "A lot of the prep work was done previously overnight and into this morning. As you prepare a team, we obviously played them last night (a 5-2 loss), so the prescout's a little different. For me, I'm comfortable. Obviously, I've been watching every game. I've been with the team all season. I know our team extremely well. I know the personnel and tendencies. So obviously, have been behind a bench before. I think the players, also, in these situations know this is an opportunity for them to

take on adversity in their own way and be better for it. That was part of the message to, 'Hey, we're all in this together. Let's do the best we can.'

## **Eric Staal traded to Canadiens by Sabres for two picks in 2021 NHL Draft**

NHL.com

March 27, 2021

Eric Staal was traded to the Montreal Canadiens by the Buffalo Sabres on Friday for a third-round and a fifth-round pick in the 2021 NHL Draft.

"This is the best atmosphere in the League by far and now to be joining the group and joining the whole city, being a Montreal Canadien, is pretty phenomenal. I'm excited," Staal said Sunday.

Staal is in the final season of a two-year, \$6.5 million contract (\$3.25 million average annual value) he signed with the Minnesota Wild on Feb. 25, 2019 and can become an unrestricted free agent after the season. The Sabres will retain \$1.625 million of the forward's salary.

"He's got size (6-foot-4, 195 pounds), he's got experience." Canadiens general manager Marc Bergevin said Saturday. "There's always a premium on centermen and defensemen down the stretch. We still have two thirds and two fifths and we picked a lot last year so I felt comfortable giving up these two assets to acquire Eric."

Staal arrived in Montreal on Saturday and began his seven-day quarantine. The Canadian Press reported Friday that NHL players acquired by a team in Canada from a United States-based team before the NHL Trade Deadline on April 12 will have to quarantine for seven days, down from 14.

Staal would first be eligible to play for Montreal on April 5 at home against the Edmonton Oilers but Bergevin said it's up to coach Dominique Ducharme to decide when Staal will play and where he will fit.

"I will leave that to him to tell you how he sees his lineup," Bergevin said. "You don't make decisions on the lineup until you have to. In the meantime, they could have injuries next week, where the decision becomes a lot easier where he fits in and how Dom wants to use him. So until then, I think we're only going to speculate where he's going to fit and where he's going to play. Players, with their performance, they'll tell you, they'll tell where they should be playing and how much ice time they should get."

The 36-year-old has scored 10 points (three goals, seven assists) in 32 games this season. He was acquired by Buffalo in a trade with Minnesota on Sept. 16.

"It hasn't been good enough. I haven't been good enough," Staal said March 18. "Clearly, in my mind, I had envisioned things differently coming here and it just hasn't come to fruition and it hasn't lived up to those thoughts. I think that's for sure been challenging, that's been difficult, but that's still no excuse. It doesn't matter. I have more pride in myself, what I can do in this league, what I can do on the ice, and at the end of the day it hasn't been good enough for me personally, and obviously, clearly it hasn't been good enough for our team either."

Selected by the Carolina Hurricanes with the No. 2 pick in the 2003 NHL Draft, Staal has scored 1,031 points (439 goals, 592 assists) in 1,272 regular-season games with the Sabres, Wild, New York Rangers and Hurricanes, and 51 points (21 goals, 30 assists) in 62 Stanley Cup Playoff games. He won the Cup with the Hurricanes in 2006.

"Everybody knows what's going on with the situation that we're in and we know that there's going to be changes coming," Sabres forward Kyle Okposo said Friday. "Still doesn't make it any easier. Found out about 'Staal'sy' right before practice and just got off the ice to go wish him well. He's a character guy. He's a really good person, he's a good man. He's had a heck of a career to date and he's going to continue to play well. So I wish him nothing but the best."

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

"Certainly, we lost a great, great person and a great leader in the locker room," Sabres coach Don Granato said before a 3-2 loss at the Boston Bruins on Saturday. "I watched his in-between period interview the other day, he looked exhausted and depleted. I can tell you behind the scenes, he's the exact opposite. He was amazing,

keeping guys up on the bench through this adversity and challenge, in the locker room, saying the right things. For me as a coach, certainly as a new coach, I could not have asked for a more supportive veteran-experience player around."

Bergevin, who on Thursday said the Canadiens would likely be quiet before the trade deadline, said two other teams were trying to acquire Staal and that the trade came together quickly.

"Some trades take a long time, some are quicker. That one came really fast. What I said was true at the time," Bergevin said. "Not that I wasn't looking but I didn't think it was going to happen. The main reason was I needed [NHL salary] cap space and whatever money I was getting in, at least in Eric's case they had to retain at least 50 percent and Buffalo was willing to do that.

"I did have conversations with Buffalo a while back, and I know the 14 days (quarantine) became an issue, but then when that was lifted it made it a lot easier to make the trade."

## **Buffalo Sabres trade center Eric Staal to Montreal Canadiens for pair of 2021 picks**

Greg Wyshynski  
ESPN

March 26, 2021

The Buffalo Sabres traded center Eric Staal to the Montreal Canadiens for two draft picks on Friday, ending a brief and disappointing run for the veteran star in Buffalo.

The Canadiens sent 2021 third- and fifth-round draft picks to Buffalo for Staal. The Sabres retained 50% of Staal's salary: \$1.625 million of his \$3.25 million cap hit.

Staal, 36, played 32 games for Buffalo this season after being acquired from the Minnesota Wild in the offseason. Much was expected from the veteran center, but like the rest of the last-place Sabres he was a disappointment: three goals, seven assists and a minus-20 in those games.

Staal is in his 17th NHL season, having scored 1,031 points in 1,272 regular-season games with the Carolina Hurricanes, New York Rangers, Minnesota Wild and the Sabres.

"The professionalism Eric displayed during his time with the Sabres was felt by everybody in our organization from top to bottom," first-year Sabres general manager Kevyn Adams said. "I know his leadership and demeanor were valued by our players, coaches and staff, and Eric's impact on our young players is obvious."

Montreal was in need of a veteran center who could help in the faceoff circle. Staal has a 49.1% success rate on faceoffs in his career. The Canadiens were right up against the salary cap, but were able to make the deal work with Buffalo retaining a percentage of Staal's salary and by dropping veteran forward Paul Byron (\$2,325,000 AAV) to the taxi squad.

"At the end of the day, it always comes back to the cap," GM Marc Bergevin said on Thursday. "Once you're a team that's up against the cap, it's money in and money out."

The move comes as the Canadian government will reportedly reduce its federal quarantine from 14 days to seven days for NHL players traded from U.S. teams, a move that could be official as early as Friday.

## Quick Shifts: What Eric Staal's trade means for the Taylor Hall market

By Luke Fox

Sportsnet

March 27, 2021

A quick mix of the things we gleaned from the week of hockey, serious and less so, and rolling four lines deep. This is just a makeup column for botching the last one.

1. "Yeah, for sure," Taylor Hall says, he'd be willing to waive his no-trade clause. And escape the disaster that is the Buffalo Sabres in 2021.

Rare to see a player so bluntly honest, but we're past sugarcoating here.

It's sad to watch the deterioration of the Sabres, who have been shut out in more games (seven) than they've won (six). And who have now traded one of their major off-season acquisitions, Eric Staal, to Montreal — a team originally on Staal's no-trade list — 17 days in advance of the trade deadline.

That an inexperienced Kevyn Adams must now execute more critical rental deals in the next two weeks (when he's not forced behind the bench himself) only adds to the drama.

The trick will be maximizing his return on Hall after yielding just a third- and a fifth-round pick for Staal, plus retaining half his salary.

How much is that paltry return for a middle-six centreman the fault of Adams versus selling guys with poor stat lines in a buyer's market?

The asking price for Hall begins with a first-round pick, according to Pierre LeBrun.

Six players were traded at the 2020 deadline for return packages that included a first-rounder: Brady Skjei, Barclay Goodrow, Jean-Gabriel Pageau, Ondrej Kase, Blake Coleman, and Jason Zucker.

All but Pageau had term on their deals, ensuring the acquiring team multiple runs. And the Pageau deal only went through because he put pen to paper on an extension with the Islanders immediately after.

In other words, none were a pure rental like Hall.

Even if he retains half of Hall's exorbitant \$8-million cap hit, Adams' price will have to drop. While a reduced Canadian quarantine could open a couple options, Hall's full no-move clause could also limit his GM's trade partners.

The funny thing is, the Staal trade — hardly a windfall — may have just helped set the market against Buffalo's favour.

## **Eric Staal traded to Montreal Canadiens from lowly Sabres**

By Gabriel Fernandez

CBS Sports

March 26, 2021

Center Eric Staal was traded to the Montreal Canadiens Friday in exchange for a third and fifth-round pick in the upcoming NHL Draft. The 36-year-old spent this season on the floundering Buffalo Sabres after he was traded from the Minnesota Wild last September.

Through 32 games this season, the veteran has posted just 10 points (three goals, seven assists), a mark that he himself has been hard on himself over.

"It hasn't been good enough. I haven't been good enough," Staal said March 18, per NHL.com. "Clearly, in my mind, I had envisioned things differently coming here and it just hasn't come to fruition and it hasn't lived up to those thoughts. I think that's for sure been challenging, that's been difficult, but that's still no excuse. It doesn't matter. I have more pride in myself, what I can do in this league, what I can do on the ice, and at the end of the day it hasn't been good enough for me personally, and obviously, clearly it hasn't been good enough for our team either."

The Sabres currently have the worst record in the league by a fair margin. They sit at a 6-22-4 record, having not won a game since Feb. 25, and have a dismal goal differential of minus-49. The next closest team in terms of win percentage is a tie between the Detroit Red Wings and Anaheim Ducks, who each sit at .353 for the season. As for goal differential, that's lower than the next lowest total -- also shared between the Red Wings and Ducks -- by eight goals despite playing two fewer games.

"The professionalism Eric displayed during his time with the Sabres was felt by everybody in our organization from top to bottom," Sabres general manager Kevyn Adams said. "I know his leadership and demeanor were valued by our players, coaches and staff, and Eric's impact on our young players is obvious."

Staal's career stats since being drafted in 2003 by the Carolina Hurricanes include 1,031 points (439 goals, 592 assists) and 1,272 regular season games under his belt. He won a Stanley Cup with Carolina in 2006, and will now be joining a team that at least has a winning record, but currently sits fourth in the Scotia North division.

## **Eric Staal Traded to Montreal**

By Ryan Kennedy

The Hockey News

March 26, 2021

The seal has officially been broken on the trade deadline, as the Montreal Canadiens have acquired center Eric Staal from the Buffalo Sabres in exchange for two 2021 draft choices; a third-rounder and a fifth-rounder. Buffalo also retains \$1.62 million in salary, half of Staal's stipend this year.

For Montreal, the addition of a big, veteran center who has a Stanley Cup ring to his name is a no-brainer. The Canadiens are fairly comfortable in the North Division standings right now and based on games-in-hand, it will take a big swoon for them to drop out of fourth place. The team has been decent under new coach Dominique Ducharme, but they certainly can't let up, with a slew of games against Toronto, Edmonton and Winnipeg coming in early April.

Montreal's centers have not been intimidating of late, with Nick Suzuki cooling off from his torrid early-season pace and Philip Danault still with just two goals to show for the season. Jesperi Kotkaniemi has also been fine, but not a world-beater. And while Staal's numbers in Buffalo are anything but inspiring this season, it is important to remember that everything Sabres-related has been a catastrophe.

What Staal does bring is a big body and some old-man strength down the middle - something that becomes a lot more important in the playoffs. There's also the obvious advantage of depth at center, the most critical position in the game. Looking big-picture, the Habs will likely face either Toronto, Winnipeg or Edmonton in the first round of the playoffs and all three of those opponents would have an advantage on Montreal at the pivot position. Staal might not tip the scales in Montreal's favor, but he does certainly help the disparity.

For Buffalo, the Staal move is the first of likely several, as GM Kevyn Adams tries to get as much as he can for a roster that has sagged terribly this season. Staal is slated to hit unrestricted free agency this summer, so he is a classic "rental" trade. Could the Sabres have gotten more for such a coveted asset?

Perhaps what is most eyebrow-raising is that both picks are for the 2021 draft. It might have been more prudent for Adams to make one of the selections a 2022 pick, since this year's draft class has been chaotic to scout: OHL players haven't even hit the ice yet and it's hard to say if they even will at this point. Meanwhile, the WHL regular season is being limited to 24 games and many other leagues have been rocked by schedule problems due to the pandemic.

There's also the matter of Buffalo's ever-changing scouting department. As reported by The Athletic's John Vogl, an already skeleton staff is currently going under more revisions as director of amateur scouting Jeremiah Crowe is being moved over to the pro scouting side, with Jerry Forton taking over his role just a few months before the draft itself. Currently, the Sabres have a very small scouting department and that's not good news for a team that needs to keep rebuilding.

The third- and fifth-rounders in 2021 do replace previous picks that had been traded away already, so Buffalo now has eight picks for the seven-round draft - but the sixth round is the only one with multiple selections.

With Taylor Hall on top of the trade deadline target board, Buffalo is probably not done acquiring future assets, so maybe the Staal haul was simply an appetizer. It's hard to see Sabres fans releasing any of their skepticism until Adams gets some bigger prizes (like a first-rounder and/or a promising prospect) however, and it's been that kind of season.

## **Eric Staal is a Canadian, rescued from the Sabres tire fire. Taylor Hall can't be far behind**

By Damien Cox  
Toronto Star  
March 26, 2021

It was the second most significant trade of the NHL season so far. Which isn't saying much. Not a great deal has happened yet.

The blockbuster deal between Columbus and Winnipeg 10 days after the start of the season that made Patrik Laine a member of the Blue Jackets and sent Pierre-Luc Dubois north to Manitoba remains the biggest transaction of the season. It's unlikely any deal will top it by the April 12 deadline.

The acquisition of centre Eric Staal by the Montreal Canadiens on Friday did, however, essentially kick off deadline activity. Quarantines are complicating matters on both sides of the border, so it makes sense that proactive teams are in the mood to make moves now.

Montreal gave up third- and fifth-round draft picks this summer to rescue the 36-year-old Staal from the smouldering tire fire in Buffalo. The Sabres are setting records for futility, making Kevyn Adams' first year as an NHL general manager an utter nightmare.

He's already had to fire a head coach, Ralph Krueger, and on Thursday night had to step behind the bench himself when Krueger's replacement, Don Granato, was placed on the COVID ineligible list. He got to observe Staal up close, not to mention Taylor Hall, and decided Friday he'd seen enough to start pulling the trigger on what could well be a series of trades.

The Canadiens, of course, are scrambling for their playoff lives, and undoubtedly wanted to move on Staal immediately. The Canadian government may be prepared to reduce the number of quarantine days for NHL players crossing into Canada from the United States to seven days from 14, which would allow Staal to play his first game in a Montreal uniform April 3 against Ottawa.

As well, the Canadiens may also soon get their mitts on one of their top prospects, five-foot-seven University of Wisconsin forward Cole Caufield. So, a week that has been a difficult one with several Montreal games postponed because of COVID issues, including Friday night against the Edmonton Oilers, has ended with decidedly more promising developments on the Habs front.

As it stands, they might face the Leafs in the first round for the first time in more than 40 years. A big centre like the six-foot-four Staal might well be a preferable matchup for Dominique Ducharme against Auston Matthews or John Tavares than Nick Suzuki, Jesperi Kotkaniemi, Jake Evans or Phillip Danault. The fact Staal hasn't scored in 23 games and is at the end of an excellent career, well, Montreal will just hope he'll be able to give them a little more of the veteran savvy Corey Perry has offered.

Staal won't be able to wear the No. 12 he's worn his entire career — Montreal has retired that jersey for both Dickie Moore and Yvan Cournoyer — but he'll be happy to get the chance to play post-season games he wasn't going to get in Buffalo. Montreal was on his no-trade list of 10 teams, so the fact he waived that clause clearly demonstrated he just wanted to get away from the Sabres as fast as possible.

On Thursday, Montreal GM Marc Bergevin said he was "probably very unlikely" to make any moves before the deadline, another reminder not to believe a word that comes out of the mouths of most NHL executives at this time of year. Buffalo's willingness to eat half of Staal's remaining contract greased the deal, and the price for Staal wasn't onerous, particularly considering Montreal has two second-round picks in this year's draft and didn't give up either.

The Habs started the season as the highest scoring team in hockey, but have cooled down over the past six weeks and settled into fourth place in the North Division. They hold a two-point lead over fifth-place Vancouver with six games in hand. Sixth-place Calgary is still in it, but has stalled again after a brief revitalization under new head coach Darryl Sutter. Playing .500 hockey the rest of the way should get the Habs to the post-season.

The Staal trade, meanwhile, opens the expected auction in Buffalo. Hall's contract expires after this season, and he seems likely to be dealt. Defenceman Brandon Montour, rearguard Jake McCabe and goalie Carter Hutton are headed for unrestricted free agency. There's talk Buffalo might be ready to move on from Sam Reinhart and Rasmus Ristolainen.

The only players unlikely to move are defenceman Rasmus Dahlin, drafted No. 1 in 2018, and winger Jeff Skinner, whose absurd \$72-million (U.S.) contract makes him the team's highest-paid player. He has three goals this season and has been a healthy scratch at times. That deal is Jason Botterill's unflattering legacy.

Hall, meanwhile, is a fascinating case. The 29-year-old has two goals in 32 games this season after "betting on himself" with a one-year, \$8-million contract last summer. It was only two years ago that Arizona gave up a first-round pick, a third-rounder and three prospects for Hall. What's he worth now? How do you evaluate a former Hart Trophy winner playing for such a bad team?

The Leafs have been one of the teams linked to Hall, and some observers believe GM Kyle Dubas is targeting a top-six forward. With Matthews' shooting percentage having dropped to seven per cent from 24 per cent in recent days, Toronto's dropped to fifth in the league in team offence.

Still excellent, but could one more shooter help? Probably. But given that Hall has a shooting percentage of seven per cent over the past three seasons while scoring 29 goals in 130 games, it's not clear he's that shooter.

Hall says he's open to be moved. Based on Staal's decision, anywhere else is a better place to be.

## **March 20 game between Sabres and Bruins rescheduled for April 20**

By Chris Ryndak

Sabres.com

March 28, 2021

The Buffalo Sabres' game against the Boston Bruins originally scheduled for Saturday, March 20 will now be played on Tuesday, April 20 at 7 p.m. at KeyBank Center. The NHL announced the new date along with 18 other rescheduled games Sunday evening.

The March 20 contest was postponed after four Bruins players joined Sean Kuraly in the NHL's COVID-19 protocols on March 19.

The game moving to April 20 sets up a stretch of three games in a row against Boston at KeyBank Center. The two clubs were already scheduled to play back-to-back games on April 22 and 23 in Buffalo.

It also extends Buffalo's homestand during that time to five games over seven days (April 17-23).

Buffalo's next game is Monday night at home against the Philadelphia Flyers. Faceoff is at 7 p.m. on MSG and WGR 550 with pregame coverage on MSG beginning at 6:30.

## **Sabres reassign Luukkonen, Murray to Amerks**

By Chris Ryndak

Sabres.com

March 28, 2021

The Buffalo Sabres have reassigned goaltender Ukko-Pekka Luukkonen and forward Brett Murray to the Rochester Americans (AHL).

Luukkonen has started eight of the Amerks' 11 games and has logged a 5-2-1 record with a .904 save percentage and a 3.19 goals-against average.

Murray has seven points (3+4) in 10 points this season for Rochester.

Rochester's next scheduled game is Wednesday against the Cleveland Monsters at Blue Cross Arena.

The Sabres will host the Philadelphia Flyers tomorrow at 7 p.m. at KeyBank Center, opening up a four-game homestand. Catch the game on MSG and WGR 550 with pregame coverage on MSG starting at 6:30.

## 'They elevated their intensity' | Sabres unable to hold off Bruins' push

By Jourdon LaBarber

Sabres.com

March 27, 2021

Sam Reinhart scored to establish an early lead and Linus Ullmark was steady in his return to the net, but a lopsided third period was the difference for the Buffalo Sabres in a 3-2 loss to the Boston Bruins at TD Garden on Saturday.

The Sabres entered the second intermission with a 2-1 lead on the strength of goals from Reinhart and Kyle Okposo. Nick Ritchie tied the game early in the third period and Craig Smith scored the winning goal with 3:50 remaining. The Bruins played to a 15-3 shot advantage over the final 20 minutes.

The loss extended Buffalo's winless streak to 17 games (0-15-2).

Here are five takeaways.

### 1. Bruins make a third-period push

The Sabres held an advantage in 5-on-5 shot attempts (27-25) and high-danger attempts (5-3) over the first 40 minutes, according to NaturalStatTrick.com. The Bruins finished the game on top in both categories thanks to a dominant third period.

"We were not as aggressive as we needed to be, collectively," Sabres interim head coach Don Granato said. "We just weren't moving as a group of five well enough. We did that, we got into a rhythm to start the game and in the third, just in my head here, we were not moving as a unit. They elevated their intensity; we didn't elevate as we should have."

Ritchie buried a loose puck for the game-tying goal after defenseman Charlie McAvoy put on a one-man show in the Buffalo zone, circling with the puck before tossing it to the front off the leg of Rasmus Ristolainen.

Smith drove from end to end with the puck on the play that led to his winning goal. He passed across to Ritchie and then found space on the back side to bury a loose puck.

"I know our guys will not like how it even came down the rink and entered the zone," Granato said. "We had multiple layers of opportunity to do things to take more initiative to create a turnover sooner. So, the fact that we didn't do that consecutively tells you you're in a little bit of a state of hesitation."

### 2. "We should just be playing free"

Okposo attributed the Sabres' lack of push in the third period to a lack of confidence.

"I think right now it's a little bit of a confidence thing," he said. "We've obviously been struggling to score all year and we know that it's a time that we have to score and I just think we're gripping it a little bit too tight when we shouldn't."

"Pressure should be off right now. Obviously, we have the weight of this, of what's going on, but we shouldn't be squeezing our sticks right now. We should just be playing free, playing the right way, trying to make things happen."

### 3. Okposo, Ullmark return

Okposo was back following a three-game absence stemming from a neck injury that flared up after practice last Sunday. He buried a rebound during the second period for his second goal in as many contests, the product of net pressure from linemates Cody Eakin and Steven Fogarty.

Ullmark returned from a 15-game absence dating back to Feb. 25, when he sustained a lower-body injury against New Jersey. He made 33 saves.

"Obviously he's a really good goalie and he played really well today," Okposo said. "He showed what he can do. I mean, he made a ton of good saves, he was very calm back there and he played great. He's the type of goalie that can give you a chance to win every night and it was good to see him back."

#### 4. Power-play drought comes to an end

Reinhart intercepted a pass from Bruins goaltender Dan Vladar and scored on Buffalo's first power play of the afternoon, snapping an 0-for-28 drought with the extra man that had spanned 15 games.

#### 5. Up next

The Sabres return home for four straight games, beginning with two against the Philadelphia Flyers on Monday and Wednesday. Coverage on Monday begins at 6:30 p.m. on MSG.

## **At The Final Horn: Sabres 2 - Bruins 3**

By Chris Ryndak

Sabres.com

March 27, 2021

Linus Ullmark and Kyle Okposo returned to the Buffalo Sabres' lineup Saturday afternoon and made a positive impact, but the Boston Bruins scored twice in the third period to win 3-2 at TD Garden.

Craig Smith scored with 3:50 left in regulation as the Bruins handed the Sabres their 17th-straight loss.

Ullmark, making his first start in net since a lower-body injury on February 25 sidelined him for 15 games, was stellar between the pipes and stopped 33 shots.

Okposo and Sam Reinhart scored for Buffalo. Okposo had missed the past three games with an upper-body injury and has now scored in back-to-back games.

Matt Grzelcyk and Nick Ritchie also scored for Boston. Dan Vladar made 25 saves.

The Sabres are 0-15-2 over their last 17 games. Their last win came on February 23.

Buffalo scored its first power-play goal in 16 games, snapping an 0-for-28 slump. The team finished 1-for-3 with the man advantage and 5-for-5 on the penalty kill.

### What happened

The Sabres took advantage of an early power play to open the scoring. Sabres score on the power play. On a dump in, Vladar went behind the net to play the puck, but gave puck right to Reinhart, who cut in from behind the goal line to tuck a backhand into the empty net 2:01 into the game.

The goal snapped a nine-game goalless streak for Reinhart.

The Bruins tied the game with 8:19 left on a delayed penalty. With Vladar pulled in favor of the extra attacker, Grzelcyk carried the puck into the middle of the ice at the point and shot the puck through traffic to beat Ullmark.

Buffalo quickly regained the lead thanks to Okposo, who knocked in a loose puck with 5:48 to play in the second.

At the 5:22 mark of the third period, Boston evened the score. Charlie McAvoy circled the Sabres and eventually threw the puck out in front, where it bounced off defenseman Rasmus Ristolainen's skate and right to Ritchie, who put it in.

Smith pounced on a loose puck late in the third period for what turned out to be the game-winning goal.

Buffalo was outshot 15-3 in the final 20 minutes of play.

### Roll the highlight film

Here's Reinhart's team-leading 12 th goal of the season:

### Worth mentioning

The Sabres recalled forward Jean-Sebastien Dea from the taxi squad prior to the game. Dea recorded two shots in 5:33 of action. He skated one shift in the third period.

Forward C.J. Smith and goaltender Michael Houser have been loaned to the taxi squad.

### Coming up

The Sabres will host the Philadelphia Flyers on Monday at 7 p.m. at KeyBank Center. The game opens up a four-game homestand, which concludes on Saturday against the New York Rangers. The team will welcome fans for the game on April 3. Get all the details here.

## **Morning Skate | Ullmark, Okposo to return in Boston**

By Jourdon LaBarber

Sabres.com

March 27, 2021

Linus Ullmark will start in net for the Buffalo Sabres when they visit the Boston Bruins at TD Garden on Saturday afternoon.

Ullmark has missed the past 15 games after sustaining a lower-body injury against New Jersey on Feb. 25. His absence has coincided with Buffalo's 16-game winless streak (0-14-2). The goaltender is 5-4-2 with a .919 save percentage in 12 games

Kyle Okposo will also return to the lineup at forward after missing the past three games with a neck injury. Jean Sebastien-Dea will step in and make his season debut for the Sabres, filling the void left by Friday's trade that saw the team acquire draft picks from Montreal in exchange for Eric Staal.

"It's just part of the business and it happens," interim head coach Don Granato said. "Certainly, we lost a great person and a great leader in the locker room. I watched him between period interview the other day, he looked exhausted and depleted. I can tell you behind the scenes he's the exact opposite. He was amazing keeping guys up on the bench through this adversity and challenge."

Granato and interim assistant coach Matt Ellis will be back behind the bench after missing Thursday's game in accordance with the NHL's COVID-19 protocols. Granato and Ellis both cleared protocols Friday, indicating a false positive test.

"I was vaccinated a month ago," Granato said. "I had a second shot just over a week ago now. When I got the call and it was, 'Stay in your room, this happened,' quite honestly I didn't believe it. I said, 'It's not right.' It didn't feel right. I say that because I believe the protocols that have been in place have given me a level of confidence that I didn't feel any panic at all."

Coverage on MSG begins at 12:30 p.m. Puck drop is scheduled for 1.

## **Ullmark, Okposo activated from injured reserve**

By Chris Ryndak

Sabres.com

March 27, 2021

The Buffalo Sabres have activated forward Kyle Okposo and goaltender Linus Ullmark from injured reserve, and have recalled forward Jean-Sebastien Dea from the taxi squad for today's game against the Boston Bruins.

Forward C.J. Smith and goaltender Michael Houser have been loaned to the taxi squad.

Ullmark has been out since sustaining a lower-body injury on February 25. He leads the team with five wins, a .919 save percentage and a 2.44 goals-against average in 12 games this season.

Okposo has missed the past three games after a neck injury flared up after practice last Sunday.

Dea will wear No. 38 after wearing No. 15 in the three games he played for Buffalo last season. In 32 career NHL games, the 27-year-old center has recorded seven points (5+2). He leads the Rochester Americans with 12 points (4+8) in nine games and was the team's leading scorer in 2019-20 with 39 points (15+24) in 57 games.

Stay tuned for Sabres interim coach Don Granato's pregame comments from TD Garden.

Faceoff is scheduled for 1 p.m. on MSG and WGR 550. Pregame coverage on MSG begins at 12:30.

## 'There's going to be changes' | Sabres react to Staal trade

By Jourdon LaBarber

Sabres.com

March 26, 2021

Kyle Okposo stopped to wish Eric Staal well upon leaving the ice after practice at TD Garden on Friday.

The Buffalo Sabres completed a deal to acquire third- and fifth-round picks in the 2021 NHL Draft from the Montreal Canadiens in exchange for Staal later that afternoon, making him the first pending unrestricted free agent to depart in advance of the April 12 trade deadline.

"Nobody's naïve here," Okposo said. "Everybody knows what's going on with the situation that we're in and we know that there's going to be changes coming. Still doesn't make it any easier.

"Found out about Staalsy right before practice and just got off the ice to go wish him well. He's a character guy. He's a really good person, he's a good man. He's had a heck of a career to date and he's going to continue to play well. So, I wish him nothing but the best."

Buffalo acquired Staal from the Minnesota Wild in September, a move designed to add veteran experience in the dressing room and a No. 2 center behind captain Jack Eichel. He was a popular figure on the team even as the season went awry.

"Even in these down times here he always came in with a positive mindset, was always a great guy, I think, to even just the young guys onward," Brandon Montour said. "Having him around the locker room and seeing his face just around the hotel, practices, games, it's great to have him here, for sure."

Staal tallied 10 points (3+7) in 32 games with the Sabres. He acknowledged recently that the season had not gone as expected, a roller coaster of a year in which the Sabres have dealt with a two-week pause due to COVID-19, injuries to multiple key players, and most recently a coaching change. All of it has added up to an ongoing 16-game winless streak (0-14-2).

Montour is one of eight pending unrestricted free agents on the active roster, a group that also includes forward Taylor Hall. Hall said following Thursday's loss to the Pittsburgh Penguins that he would be open to waiving his no-movement clause if approached about a deal.

"I can only control being on the ice," Montour said. "I'm not my agent or the GM. I think everybody knows I'm a UFA at the end of the year. Teams could be calling, could not be calling. That's not my decision. If I'm wearing a Buffalo Sabres jersey or whatever jersey, I'm a player and my job is to go on the ice, so that's all I'm focused on."

Here are more notes from Friday's practice.

### Okposo, Thompson return

Okposo joined the team on the road after initially staying back in Buffalo due to an injury that flared up after practice on Sunday. The forward revealed his symptoms were reminiscent of the neck injury that ended his season in 2017.

"I was alarmed for sure," he said. "It's something that has been part of my life here over the past number of years and something that you I probably will continue to deal with. But I have a great team here in place and great people around me to work with that I know what to do and how to get through it. So, I'm happy that I dealt with hit quickly."

Okposo said it was too early to say whether he would be available to play against the Bruins on Saturday afternoon.

Thompson also re-joined the team after missing the past two games due to an illness. Interim head coach Don Granato had said prior to Thompson's absence that he hoped to see the 23-year-old winger benefit from consistent time in the lineup.

"I think if we can get him in the lineup consistently and get him to feel settled in, the work he's putting in lines up well with that," Granato said. "I feel that that's really a natural process, him feeling more confidence to feel more determined in scoring areas and puck battles - really a point of taking ownership."

Granato, Ellis clear COVID protocols

Granato and interim assistant coach Matt Ellis both cleared COVID protocols and were expected to join the team in Boston after practice on Friday, the team announced. Rochester Americans coach Seth Appert ran the session in their absence.

Granato and Ellis both missed the team's loss to Pittsburgh on Thursday in accordance with the NHL's COVID-19 protocols. General manager Kevyn Adams served as coach for the game.

## **Sabres acquire draft picks in trade with Canadiens**

By Jourdon LaBarber

Sabres.com

March 26, 2021

The Buffalo Sabres have acquired a third-round pick and fifth-round pick in the 2021 NHL Draft from the Montreal Canadiens in exchange for forward Eric Staal.

Buffalo now holds eight picks in the 2021 NHL Draft.

The Sabres acquired Staal in September from the Minnesota Wild. He recorded three goals and 10 points in 32 games with Buffalo this season.

## **Granato, Ellis clear COVID-19 protocol**

By Chris Ryndak

Sabres.com

March 26, 2021

Buffalo Sabres interim head coach Don Granato and interim assistant coach Matt Ellis have cleared COVID-19 protocol and will join the team in Boston after practice today.

General manager Kevyn Adams served as head coach during last night's game after Granato and Ellis had to self-quarantine in accordance with NHL COVID-19 protocols.

The Sabres are set to practice at TD Garden at around 1:30 p.m. Stay tuned to Sabres.com, the team's social media platforms and the new Sabres app for news and other updates.

Buffalo will face the Boston Bruins tomorrow at 1 p.m. on MSG and WGR 550. Pregame coverage on MSG will begin at 12:30 p.m.