



Buffalo Sabres

Daily Press Clips

March 9, 2021

Sabres' Rasmus Dahlin experiencing growing pains in new role on defense

By Lance Lysowski

The Buffalo News

March 9, 2021

PHILADELPHIA – Rasmus Dahlin did not hang his head. He didn't even glance at a group of New York Islanders swarming forward Matt Martin to celebrate their fifth goal Thursday night.

Dahlin, now a 20-year-old defenseman and 164 games into a National Hockey League career that began with his selection first overall at the 2018 draft, skated toward the Buffalo Sabres' bench and used his right hand to lift his stick in the air to signal for a line change.

Martin, a fourth-line grinder known more for his right hook than scoring touch, had just skated by Dahlin and across the front of the Sabres' net before jamming the puck past goalie Jonas Johansson to seal the Islanders' 5-2 win. In years past, Dahlin's frustration might have boiled over.

One of the NHL's bright young defensemen, Dahlin has grown accustomed to the sometimes overwhelming emotion that comes with failure. He's experienced more than his fair share during his third season in the NHL. Entering Monday, Dahlin owned a league-worst minus-21 rating – on pace for minus-75 if this were an 82-game season – and advanced metrics illustrate how he's struggling at times to adjust to a bigger role defensively.

"It comes (down to forgetting) things, it comes (down) to working harder," Dahlin said matter of factly. "You are allowed to get (upset) at yourself. ... But it's so many games, you have to not think about it, you have to go forward and reload, think about the next game."

The last-place Sabres (6-14-3) take a seven-game losing streak into their matchup Tuesday night against the Flyers in Wells Fargo Center. Buffalo's star players aren't scoring enough, and coach Ralph Krueger's defensive zone structure was picked apart for 15 goals against in three games on Long Island last week.

There's reason to wonder if Krueger's preferred style of play has handcuffed the otherworldly talents of Jack Eichel and Taylor Hall. However, Dahlin, labeled a transcendent talent at the time of his selection by Buffalo, also appears to be having issues in the coach's system.

Under former coach Phil Housley in 2018-19, Dahlin totaled 44 points, the second-most by an NHL defenseman before his 19th birthday. Dahlin's five-game point streak that January matched the longest by any 18-year-old defenseman in league history and his eight multipoint games matched a mark by Hall of Famer Bobby Orr.

Housley, who still owns several records for teenage defensemen in the NHL, provided Dahlin with the freedom to lead the transition offense.

There was no edict for Dahlin to dump the puck into the offensive zone or to not use his rare blend of smooth skating and remarkable skill to create space for teammates in the offensive zone. Housley and assistant coach Steve Smith worked with Dahlin to find a risk-reward balance. Despite playing on a bad defensive team, Dahlin finished with a plus-1 goal differential at 5-on-5.

Dahlin was selected a finalist for the Calder Trophy and he built on that performance under Krueger in 2019-20, finishing with 40 points in just 59 games.

Risk vs. reluctance

Year 2 under Krueger has been different for Dahlin. He's not leading the rush as often. The fearlessness he showed as a rookie hasn't been as consistent. Whether it's Krueger's preference or signs of a player fearful of making a mistake, Dahlin appears tentative at times in 5-on-5 situations.

Dahlin showed Sunday what taking risks can do for the Sabres' offense. With Buffalo trailing by three goals in the third period, Dahlin carried the puck deep in the offensive zone, circled back to the blue line to create space for his teammates and passed to Casey Mittelstadt moments before Jeff Skinner scored.

"No, we don't play like we want right now," said Dahlin when asked if there's a reason why he doesn't carry the puck as often. "We just try to find a way to win hockey games; it doesn't matter if I have the puck on my blade a lot."

The problem begins in the defensive zone. Dahlin ranks last among all Sabres defensemen in limiting on-ice shot quality at 5-on-5, and he's in the middle of the pack in shot-quality share. Evolving-Hockey.com's metric goals above replacement, which places a value on a player's overall contribution to his team, has Dahlin tied with winger Kyle Okposo for the worst mark on the Sabres. Under Housley, Dahlin ranked first among all qualifying Sabres defensemen in all three statistics.

Dahlin's individual shot quality at 5-on-5 ranks second among Buffalo defensemen this season, although it still pales to his impact as a rookie.

"You want to go first overall," said winger Taylor Hall, who was drafted first by the Edmonton Oilers in 2010. "You do everything you can in those years leading up, and then it happens and you realize there's a lot of pressure that comes with that No. 1 pick. But you just have to play hockey. You have to go out and show your skills, show your compete. Ras has a really bright future in this league. I think everyone in this organization know that and sees that on a daily basis. Like a lot of guys on our team, we're not a confident group."

Ice time rises

Although Dahlin is receiving a similar workload in 5-on-5 ice time, he has been given greater responsibility in his own end. He ranks first among all Sabres defensemen, and second on the team, in defensive zone starts at 5-on-5. For context, Dahlin was sheltered during his first two seasons, ranking fourth and sixth among defensemen in D-zone starts in 2018-19 and 2019-20, respectively.

Dahlin is averaging a career-high 21:12 ice time per game and has logged the second-most 5-on-5 minutes behind Brandon Montour. The growing pains away from the puck are like those fellow Swede Victor Hedman experienced early in his career with Tampa Bay. Hedman has since become one of the top defensemen in the NHL.

Dahlin is still elite on the power play, as eight of his 10 points have come on the man advantage. He quarterbacks a top unit that has helped Buffalo's power play rank third in the NHL through 23 games. But Krueger wants Dahlin to sharpen his play away from the puck and to learn when to use his gifts to drive the offense.

The season-ending injury to Jake McCabe has thrust Dahlin into a new role that Krueger is confident he will eventually thrive in.

"If something's off or goes wrong, he's processing it well," Krueger said. "He loves the video sessions and his offense remains genius, his first pass remains genius, and he adds so much to our transition game. But it's the game without the puck, the physicality he's looking for. He's ever more in the better positions and also learning to manage that energy, to pick his spots to jump into the offense."

"When you're playing 17, 18 minutes, there's more freedom to jump in all the time and he now needs to be more selective when he does get involved offensively and he's getting better at that, too. Just a kid who's really receptive to coaching and who's just going to continue to get better every game."

Sabres notebook: Special teams could provide pathway to snapping skid

By Lance Lysowski

The Buffalo News

March 8, 2021

PHILADELPHIA – The unrest surrounding the Buffalo Sabres was described by coach Ralph Krueger as “white noise.”

The 61-year-old insists the criticism about the Sabres’ performance – a 6-14-3 record with an NHL-worst 15 points – fuels him to orchestrate a turnaround. Yet, following a three-game series sweep at the hands of the Islanders on Sunday, Krueger seemed no closer to a solution than when he and his players first hit the road last week.

“It’s not a fun time,” bemoaned Krueger. “These aren’t easy times, but truly they are times where you could grow and learn if you take the right lessons out of it. We need to find lessons right now and really evaluate everything that’s within our control as coaches and work together with the players to pull ourselves together. The only way we’re going to get out of this is with a group effort.”

In preparation for their sixth game in eight days, Krueger opted to not have the Sabres practice Monday in Philadelphia. His players had off-ice workouts and will hold a morning skate before they wrap up the road trip with a game Tuesday night against the Flyers in Wells Fargo Center.

Buffalo, amid a seven-game losing streak, has scored the fewest 5-on-5 goals in the NHL and was shut out in each of its last two games against the Flyers. However, it was the Sabres’ defense that had Krueger concerned following the series on Long Island.

The Sabres allowed a combined seven goals in the second period of the latter two matchups. Confidence has been an issue. Star players have earned scoring chances early in games, only to miss the net or have the opposing goalie make a big save.

When frustration mounts, the opponent scores and the Sabres tend to not respond well to adversity. Special teams could be a solution against Philadelphia (12-7-3), which has surrendered 15 goals while losing three of its last four games.

Entering Monday, the Sabres’ power play and penalty kill ranked third and ninth in the NHL, respectively. Buffalo has played sixth consecutive games without allowing a power-play goal, the first time the team has accomplished that feat since Dec. 4-16, 2018.

The Flyers, meanwhile, have the league’s 22nd-best power play and are 28th on the penalty kill.

The problem is Buffalo's had only three power play opportunities over its last four games, although it scored on one delayed penalty in Nassau Coliseum.

Creating chaos in the offensive zone is always a sound strategy to try to lure opponents into a mistake.

Defensemen helped in that regard Sunday, as Rasmus Dahlin, Jacob Bryson, Brandon Montour and Colin Miller showed a willingness to jump into the play. Montour found an open lane backdoor and missed the net after receiving a perfect pass from Jack Eichel; Dahlin drew the Islanders out of position prior to Jeff Skinner’s goal by skating deep into the zone; and Miller scored for the Sabres by firing a shot from the right circle.

Lottery note

Sportsnet’s Chris Johnston reported Monday that the NHL outlined proposed changes to the draft lottery in a memo circulated to teams.

According to Johnston, the NHL is looking to limit teams to no more than two lottery wins in a five-year period, prevent teams from jumping more than 10 spots and reduce the number of picks decided by the lottery from three to two.

Under the proposed changes – which will require the approval of the NHL's Board of Governors – the Sabres would draft no later than third overall if the season ended Monday.

The Sabres have drafted in the top 10 for eight consecutive years and currently have the best odds to select first overall in 2021.

Travis Yost's Sabre Metrics: Buffalo's lines don't threaten interior of opposing defenses

By Travis Yost
The Buffalo News
March 8, 2021

Travis Yost has been involved in the world of hockey analytics for a decade and is part of TSN's hockey analytics team. Prior to joining TSN, Yost was a contributor at the Ottawa Citizen, the Sporting News and NHL Numbers, and he has been a consultant for an NHL franchise. He will be contributing breakdowns on the Buffalo Sabres for The Buffalo News. Follow Yost on Twitter: @travisyost.

Attacking from the perimeter is rarely a successful strategy in the National Hockey League. Modern-day defenses are quite good at maintaining structure and pushing attackers to the outside, knowing that scoring chances from distance are hard to create. Thwart attacking sequences from the slot and between the circles, and you have the foundation of a strong defense.

That's easier said than done. Because as much as it is the defense's job to push attackers to the boards and away from its goaltender, the offense has the opposite strategy. And that strategy is not one-dimensional. Some teams funnel the attack from the wings into the middle of the ice – the Vegas Golden Knights' top line is notorious for this, with Mark Stone and Max Pacioretty attacking along the boards and pushing the puck into the low slot. Other teams attack inside out – the Edmonton Oilers leverage Connor McDavid's blazing speed and playmaking ability to force defenses to collapse, freeing up wingers for shooting lanes. And then you have Anze Kopitar with the Los Angeles Kings, a wondrous pass-first distributor who can make life just a little bit easier for winger Dustin Brown.

I bring this up because one of the biggest annoyances with the Sabres on the attack is how accepting they are of playing along the perimeter. This is a common criticism, and also a common canard – oftentimes, teams are able to pierce the interior of an opposing defense, but the shooting luck just isn't quite there.

There's no doubt the Sabres have had poor shooting luck this season, but they have also had a bizarrely difficult time getting to the dangerous areas of the ice with any degree of regularity. Consider where they shoot from on 5-on-5 (in which the team is 31st in rate scoring) compared to the power play (in which the team is third in rate scoring), courtesy HockeyViz:

At 5-on-5, you have the indications of a team that is more than comfortable generating shots from the perimeter. But look at the distance these shots have to travel. It's indicative of a team that's become too comfortable and too willing to use defenseman relief valves just inside the blue line to put pucks on net. These are ultra-low percentage shots, and outside of tips and redirects for well-placed forwards inside of the defense, they are going to struggle to find the back of the net. Compare that to the power play, where the Sabres generate high volumes of offense from multiple levels.

If we break out all four lines as anchored by the primary centers, we see that this is a bottom-nine problem that's been exacerbated by a slow start from the Jack Eichel line relative to prior years. Let's go through all four lines, starting with Eichel. And in this case, I'll baseline it to the 2018-19 season, when Eichel (playing primarily with Jeff Skinner and Sam Reinhart) had tremendous success:

The new-look Eichel line, this one featuring newcomer Taylor Hall, is still generating threatening offense – they can get to the front of the net and have generated volume in the circles – but are still far too comfortable throwing the puck back to the blue line for shooting opportunities. Compare that to the 2018-19 season, when the Sabres top line wouldn't reach for the trigger until they were inside 25 feet from the net. And in many cases, they were much closer than that.

This line has had truly terrible shooting luck, the Eichel line scoring on just 5% of their opportunities. Even discounting for the weaker shooting profile (which is problematic), it's impossible to believe this will sustain itself at such a low level, especially because Eichel's career on-ice shooting percentage is more than 8%.

Let's look at the other three lines. Coach Ralph Krueger has blundered the lines during an ugly month of February, but the centers and the usage of their respective lines has remained firm for the most part:

- Eric Staal anchoring the second line, playing with Taylor Hall/Dylan Cozens/Victor Olofsson.
- Cody Eakin anchoring the third line, playing with Tobias Rieder/Kyle Okposo.
- Curtis Lazar anchoring the fourth line, playing with Riley Sheahan/Jeff Skinner.

yost 3 march 8

It's kind of incredible how similar all three of these offensive zone shot profiles are – high volume from distance and along the half-wall, with low volume from the circles or the slot. Consequently, all three lines have struggled to generate meaningful offense. None of the bottom nine is averaging more than 1.5 goals scored per 60 minutes of 5-on-5. For a reference point, the Nashville Predators – 30th in 5-on-5 scoring this year, and the only team within striking distance of being caught by the Sabres – average 1.8 goals per 60 minutes.

And again, the concerning part is it's hard to see how it improves without a serious overhaul, be it at the personnel, coaching or executive level. The Sabres have one line that can threaten, and three lines that offer next to nothing on offense.

Perhaps the first line has a breakout of sorts when the puck starts bouncing the right way. The other groups? Plenty of reason to be skeptical there.

OPINION: Sabres lose seventh-straight game; at least Skinner broke his drought

By Paul Hamilton

WGR 550

March 7, 2021

(WGR 550) – Nothing much changes in the world of the Buffalo Sabres, so let me start with something else.

The biggest change that came from the Sabres' seventh-straight loss was Jeff Skinner scored a goal. It was a goal that we've seen the left winger score many times before, coming out from behind the net and roofing a backhand. It was Skinner's first goal since Feb. 29, 2020, covering 24 games.

Skinner's line with Curtis Lazar and Casey Mittelstadt was easily Buffalo's best on Sunday afternoon. It's hard to say this after the team's third consecutive 5-2 loss to the New York Islanders on Long Island, but I thought Mittelstadt was Buffalo's best player.

In Sunday's game, they tried the former center at right wing and he was flying. The line was in the Islanders' offensive zone on a consistent basis, and a lot of that came from Mittelstadt carrying the puck in with some solid entries.

The former first round pick in 2017 also got an assist on Skinner's goal, giving him four points in the eight games he's played. By contrast Skinner has two points in 20 games.

Buffalo still lost by three goals on Sunday and is now 0-6-0 this season against the Islanders, but they showed some life in the third period after falling behind 3-0. It didn't last long, but for 3:22, goals by Skinner and Colin Miller got them back into the game, 3-2.

Miller had a tough afternoon, but read the play very well on his goal. He joined the rush late, leaving himself wide-open for Jack Eichel to find him. I wish the Sabres' defense would do more of that. We would see so much more offensive zone time if they did.

As poorly as Eichel has played this season, the assist gave him points in four-consecutive games and five out of six.

Miller gets the goal that Ilya Sorokin should've stopped. It was very obvious they had Sorokin on the ropes. Dylan Cozens took an ordinary shot from the right circle that the Islanders goaltender got a piece of, but it got behind him. It took one of the New York defenders to dig it out before it crossed the line.

Jonas Johansson made two huge save to keep the deficit at one, and the Sabres turned and went on a 4-on-2. Sorokin did make a big save of his own on that play, thwarting a chance from Lazar.

That was all the pushback the Sabres could muster, as Brandon Davidson lost the puck to Cal Clutterbuck and then slipped. Clutterbuck kept going in alone on Johansson and put the game away.

The Islanders' energy winger has two of his three goals against the Sabres this season. The guy on the other wing, Matt Martin, has three of his four goals against Buffalo.

Anders Lee is one of the best net-front men in the NHL, yet, Rasmus Ristolainen gets on the wrong side of him, and the Islanders captain scored his 12th of the season, six of which have come against Buffalo.

Brock Nelson has four of his nine goals this season against the Sabres.

Scott Mayfield, Anthony Beauvillier and Noah Dobson all have two goals, with one coming against Buffalo.

The Sabres will be a big part of who wins the East Division. The Islanders and Washington Capitals are 10-0-1 against Buffalo, while the Pittsburgh Penguins and Boston Bruins still have eight games each against the Sabres. The Philadelphia Flyers are 3-1-0 this season versus the Sabres.

If you're the Islanders, you know you have 34 points to lead the East, but you only have four more points coming against Buffalo. Washington has 32 points with six more points coming compliments of the Sabres. The Flyers have 27 points, with eight more points coming from Buffalo, but it's Boston at 29 points with 14 to 16 more points coming from the Sabres. That puts them way ahead of the Isles and Caps. Pittsburgh has 29 points and also has 14 to 16 points likely coming from the Sabres, and that vaults them by the Islanders too.

Buffalo wraps up its disastrous road trip on Tuesday in Philadelphia.

Bills' stadium updates, Sabres' myriad problems: Tim Graham's The Satchel is back

By Tim Graham
The Athletic
March 9, 2021

What a weird March it has been already.

Buffalo Bills fans are chill. They don't have anything to kvetch about thanks to remarkable stability. Questions are few. Mundane offseason boxes should be checked without hassle.

Buffalo Sabres fans are, well, the opposite of that.

We uncinch The Satchel to see what lies within and begin with a blockbuster political story that could impact the local sports scene in a way you might not have considered.

Have there been any updates on the Bills' stadium situation? COVID obviously put a damper on those rumors, but when a team is good like the Bills hope to be, that's typically when the ownership puts on the blitz to get a new deal. —Jason S.

I'm unsure if this question refers to stadium naming rights or whether the Pegulas plan to build a new stadium over renovating their current home. So let's explore both topics.

The Bills still are finalizing a naming-rights deal and almost certainly will have one in place for the 2021 season.

As you noted, the pandemic has made these times tricky enough for businesses to navigate, but when it comes to the Bills' plans to construct a new stadium or put more money into Orchard Park, the governor's gauzy future could create problems.

For the record, the Bills' current lease expires July 30, 2023. The previous agreement, signed in 2013, took about a year and a half to negotiate.

While it might sound silly that allegations of Gov. Andrew M. Cuomo's workplace misbehavior could be a setback to Bills stadium plans, keep in mind Cuomo's office is who the Pegulas for years have been discussing public money with.

Selling the idea of taxpayer dollars for a ballpark instead of education or infrastructure never is an easy sell, and the pandemic has caused New York's population to decline and its unemployment rate to bloat.

As long as Cuomo is in control, however, the Pegulas could find some comfort in any previous discussions and assurances. As allegations pile up, however, will Cuomo still be in office at the end of the week?

Lt. Gov. Kathy Hochul is a Buffalo native. Her husband is an executive for Delaware North, the Buffalo-based stadium concessions giant. One could argue that Hochul signing off on stadium money would be considered a conflict of interest and, therefore, a dangerous political move.

If Hochul were to assume the role, then the odds would be against her winning the election in November 2022. Governors just don't come from Western or Upstate New York. The most recent was Cortland native Nathan Miller 101 years ago.

Would it be smart to promote Ralph Krueger to a management position instead of firing him? I think he's a great asset, but not a great coach. — Connor C.

Sabres coach Ralph Krueger pitched himself as a transformative figure, a master motivator and organizational wizard. That's what moved the Pegulas in the beginning. Fans and reporters were impressed, too, with Krueger's blunt assessments and get-to-the-bottom-of-it promises.

Krueger's charismatic hold has since evanesced, the last of it wafting away through his disconnected explanations about benching Jeff Skinner and Jack Eichel's confidence/health. All the while, the Sabres have lost seven in a row and are 2-11-1 over their past 14 games. Opponents have outscored them 48-25 in that span.

There has been no substance behind Krueger's avowals. Perhaps if he established some sort of on-ice bona fides before the current turbulence, then the Pegulas would want to keep him around. As of now, Krueger would bring zero value to the front office.

How positively terrifying is it that "Kevyn from accounting" is being tasked with negotiating the Sabres' equivalent of the Eric Lindros trade? Does anyone have any confidence at all that he not going to get fleeced? —Brian C.

Sabres general manager Kevyn Adams needs help whether he wants to trade Jack Eichel as part of an organizational reset or rebuild around him.

Adams chose not to hire an experienced aide probably because he believed he and Krueger had a handle on things and would rely on each other.

Now it's apparent these Sabres are every bit the embarrassment they've been for nearly a decade. Nothing has gotten better, and Krueger's magnetic swipe card will work only for as long as the Pegulas' pride will allow.

If Krueger is Buffalo's coach in 2021-22, then I will ride a tricycle around Lafayette Square in just a diaper.

Adams, therefore, seems rather naked for the April 12 trade deadline. At his introductory news conference, he noted that a GM doesn't need to have all the answers as much as he needs to know where to go for the answers. Adams has connections from his 10-year playing career. Sabres fans better hope he can dial up wisdom from his contacts list.

We all thought the Sabres' culture would change with the hiring of Ralph. Have we given him enough time to install his plan? Do we need to be more patient? Or is this more of the team quitting on the coach again after lackluster results? As a frustrated fan, do we relax and let time determine the path, or is change once again a necessity to correct the course? —Jon R.

Look at the big, pragmatic brain on Jon!

How refreshing to know there are fans out there who aren't either blindly loyal or on the verge of burning their jerseys.

That said, no, you shouldn't be more patient.

He's awful.

Does Kenny Stills supplant John Brown if Brown is cut? Was that part of the thought process when Brandon Beane signed him? —Char A.

Swapping out Brown for Stills doesn't add up to me, especially with Stills turning 29 next month after three straight seasons of dwindling production. He had 11 catches in 10 games last year for the Houston Texans.

The Bills liked Stills enough to grab him at the most crucial time of the season, signing him to the practice squad as the postseason began. The Bills promoted him to the active roster for the AFC Championship Game, but he was a healthy scratch.

Despite rosters expanding for the offseason, Stills remains a free agent. Buffalo could be interested, but apparently there hasn't been any rush to lock him up. After the season, the Bills signed receivers Duke Williams, Jake Kumerow and Tanner Gentry.

Hey, Tim. Thanks for doing this. IMO, the Sabres need a president of hockey operations if for no other reason than to help ownership get out of its own way. Thoughts? — Jim P.

This question has come up in The Satchel before. My opinion hasn't changed.

While dangerous to evaluate the front offices in an apples-to-apples way, it's fair to look at the Bills' organizational approach as a model that any sports team could follow.

The Bills prove that a president of operations or czar is unnecessary. If the general manager has full power and trust from the owners, then there is no good reason to add another layer of management between him and ownership.

Giving power to a hockey czar essentially renders the GM moot, and you will have neutered Adams within a calendar year. So we're just bandying titles about.

My opinion was the same for previous GM Jason Botterill (who arrived with extensive NHL managerial experience) as it is for Adams (who was hired with virtually no NHL managerial experience): The hockey operations nest needs to be feathered in a thicker way.

Beane's staff features a superduperheavyduty amount of NFL front office experience. The Bills employ several executives who have been GMs and who every winter interview for promotions with other teams.

Botterill's group of lieutenants paled in comparison to Beane's, and Adams' cabinet is emptier yet.

Botterill had two assistant GMs, Randy Sexton and Steve Greeley. Adams has none.

Mark Jakubowski, now listed directly under Adams within the hockey hierarchy, stayed as vice president of hockey administration. He has been with the Sabres for 15 years.

Last year's media guide listed 18 scouts. The Sabres now have seven.

Botterill needed a deeper roster of advisers.

Adams needs an army more.

Is it true that the Pegulas are trying to sell Sabretooth to Carole Baskin? — Mike C.

Once he got turned down for "Celebrity Rehab," there really was no other option.

Any chance that there could be a "do over" for the Sabres in that they release everyone and restock with an expansion draft? It worked for Vegas. — Scott S.

The Sabres would heave Taro Tsujimoto into a volcano for that opportunity. The Golden Knights launched in 2017-18, and each of their seasons has been better than anything the Sabres have accomplished in a decade.

The Seattle Kraken very well could open next season with a better team than the Sabres. The Kraken roster, with help from assistant GM Botterill, will be stocked the same way as the Golden Knights four years ago.

Not Bills- and Sabres-related, but how are the Bandits going to survive? The NLL must be absolutely screwed after COVID because of the tiny TV deals. — Prison M.

A month ago, the National Lacrosse League canceled its already-shortened 2020-21 season because of pandemic uncertainties.

The NLL, though, apparently remains an appealing investment. Panther City Lacrosse Club in Fort Worth last summer became the 14th team. The league has teased the announcement of a 15th team "early in 2021." Two weeks ago, the New England franchise was purchased and moved to Albany.

After Dylan Cozens had that spectacular fight, I asked my buddy what it meant that the rookie, and not a physical role player kind of rookie but a guy we all hope is going to be a future star, was the guy who answered the bell and did something to try and spark this team. What do you think it means for the Sabres, that the one who seems to care the most has been in the league the shortest? —Brandon C.

Let's face it: The fight was spectacular because it showed us something we haven't seen often enough. With the rest of the Sabres looking like "Night of the Skating Dead," Cozens showed some life.

Cozens' fight doesn't mean much in the grand scheme of things, just another symptom of the type of season Sabres fans are being forced to endure. The moment didn't even lift the team for the rest of that game.

The fisticuffs told me Cozens has something burning inside right at this time. Maybe it lasts; maybe it gets extinguished like whatever once was within his teammates.

The fact that the fight stood out is an indictment of Cozens' organization, wandering around in a malaise.

Thank you for your insightful writing, giving us a more human side to the vast void of stats. I once asked Doug Smith, Toronto Star beat writer, if he was a fan of the teams and athletes he covers. He said no because for him it was all about a good story. What are your thoughts? Are you a Bills fan or more a fan a compelling story? — Daniel I.

I'm grateful for the kind words, Daniel.

I get this question quite a bit. The only fandom I really have held onto is baseball, a sport I've never covered at length. Since I'm from there, I still follow the Cleveland Indians. The Cleveland Browns moving to Baltimore provided an organic break as I was beginning my sports journalism career. The NHL had no presence where I grew up, so I never developed any rooting hockey interests.

As such, I have no sentimental attachment to the main sports I've spent my life covering. My son gravitated to basketball and baseball, which means even the sports we track together usually fall outside my work realm.

I'm thankful things have worked out that way. When the Bills or Sabres don't perform well, I don't take it personally. My mind is wired to look for the most compelling and original story I can bring to my readers, win or lose.

Any new nickname ideas for Cleveland's Baseball Team? — David S.

Some nominations:

Cleveland Clinics
Cleveland RiverBurners
Cleveland Grovers
Cleveland Jobus
Cleveland Mouse McFaddens
Cleveland LeVerts
Cleveland Calvin and Hobbeses
Cleveland Red Ryders

My favorite is, though, is the one mentioned most: Cleveland Spiders. The nickname is solid on its face, but it also addresses concerns over eliminating tradition.

The Cleveland Spiders played in the late 19th century National League and predated the Indians by nearly three decades. Cy Young's first nine seasons were with the Spiders, for whom he won 36 games in 1892 and 35 games three years later.

Will the Sabres be able to sell out their home games at 10 percent capacity? — Zachary P.

This will be fascinating to monitor. Sabres fans won't want to go because the team is lousy. Fans who want to see the opponent will be limited by the closed Canadian border.

Another deterrent is mandatory proof of a negative COVID test within 72 hours of the game. Without insurance, that's another out-of-pocket cost.

Whoever shows up to these games must be some kind of hockey degenerate.

Is there any talk in the short-term (meaning within the next year or two) or in the long-term (three to five years) or is there any long-range strategic plan by any entity to launch a regional sports network to cover the Buffalo

Bills, Buffalo Sabres, Buffalo Bisons, Buffalo Bandits, Buffalo Beauts and various other professional, semi-professional, college and amateur sports teams and leagues? —Daniel M.

As much as Western New York sports fans would love to recapture what Empire Sports Network used to deliver, the cost simply is too high to maintain a regional sports television network. In fact, launching a new radio station would be unfeasible in today's broadcast landscape.

The Pegulas have explored all sorts of broadcast options for their properties. Even with controlling the rights to so many teams under the Pegula Sports and Entertainment umbrella, such a venture hasn't appealed even to them.

On a stick a fork in 'em scale of Dylan Cozens to Carter Hutton, where does Eric Staal land? —Mark M.

Are we talking a salad fork? An oyster fork? A pitchfork?

And how many courses are we serving? We doing three courses at Appleby's or leaving Texas de Brazil on a gurney?

Maybe all that additional info doesn't matter.

The answer is mignardise.

The Rangers and Jack Eichel: What would it look like if the fantasy trade match became real?

By Shayna Goldman
The Athletic
March 9, 2021

The New York Rangers are still building their path to contention. The roster has transformed since the beginning of this process, with much of the team's potential now tied up in the development of its prospects. However, general manager Jeff Gorton has also shown that he can and will look outside the organization to make a drastic change that would change the trajectory of the rebuild if the opportunity arises.

Just how drastic could it be? That depends on the opportunity. And right now, much of the focus is on one opportunity in particular: Jack Eichel, the Buffalo Sabres center whose potential availability could change the Rangers' course entirely.

Fans at the Garden have been chanting, "We want Eichel," and on Monday, The Athletic's Sabres writer John Vogl named the Rangers as one of the favorites to land the fed-up superstar. "If someone pays a King's ransom, the captain could be gone in a New York minute," Vogl reported, adding that "Los Angeles and the Rangers are the front-runners."

If Eichel is indeed available, the questions for the Rangers are cost and fit.

The cost is going to be significant because Eichel is one of the top centers in the world and a game-breaking player. Vogl estimated roughly: "it starts with NHL players, plus prospects, plus picks." The Rangers have spent years replenishing their talent stock, and this one potential trade would likely demand a return so steep it would deteriorate much of that work.

We also know that a team that parts with an elite player is more often one that loses this type of trade. And the fit cannot be overlooked. The Rangers need players who can contribute now and be key cogs in the future, and there aren't often players in their prime available who make the type of impact the 24-year-old Eichel does.

Would he push the Rangers close enough to contention to be worth the cost? How would he fit into the lineup and the cap? Let's dive in.

The Rangers have accelerated their rebuilding process at points by signing players in their prime, with Artemi Panarin being the prime example. While that has pushed them closer to their goal of becoming a contender, it also has shortened the timeline of how quickly they should be striving to open the window.

A team has to project when it will have its best chance to win based on the age and skill on its roster as well as its cap situation. Ideally, the team can optimize its roster before top players leave their primes — and that's something that adds pressure for the Rangers, whose top players include forwards Panarin (29), Mika Zibanejad (27) and Chris Kreider (29), and defensemen Adam Fox (23) and Jacob Trouba (27).

Aging curves can help teams establish when their window should be. According to the work of Cam Lawrence and Luke and Josh Younggren, forwards generally are at their peaks between 21 and 26 and steeply decline in their mid-to-late 30s. Defenders, on the other hand, typically play their best between the ages of 19 and 24. There are always exceptions to these curves; Panarin stands out as one.

In terms of the cap, to make it work for this season would take a bit of maneuvering. According to CapFriendly, the Rangers project to have a bit more than \$4.4 million in cap space by the trade deadline. Eichel carries a cap hit of \$10 million, but cap hits are prorated, and his remaining balance for 2020-21 is just over \$5.3 million. The Rangers would have to find a way to offload enough salary to make that fit, which is doable.

Long term, the cap impact gets more complicated. Eichel is signed through the end of the 2025-26 season. Here's what the Rangers' multi-year payroll looks like at the moment:

So what would this move do for their flexibility during their playoff window?

The benefit of Eichel's contract is that it's already signed; the Rangers go into any potential trade knowing exactly what he'll cost for the next five seasons. But it's still \$10 million being added when there's uncertainty about salary-cap growth. And it wouldn't be the only significant contract on the books deep into the future. Panarin, Kreider and Trouba are signed long term as well. Those three combined with Eichel would account for more than \$36 million of the cap through the 2025-26 season.

On defense, New York is due to shed about \$5.5 million either at the deadline or this offseason in Brendan Smith and Jack Johnson. The Rangers will then likely either buy out or attempt to terminate the contract of Tony DeAngelo if they can't move him, which would save additional cap space. Other players' buyout costs weighing down this season's cap room decrease by about \$9 million this offseason as well.

Here's what the payroll would look like with Eichel:

On the surface, this seems manageable — the cap savings from buyouts going toward Eichel's long-term cap hit. But that's before accounting for notable free agents the team will have to deal with over the next few seasons.

It's a general manager's job to maximize the years his team has of entry-level contracts for key players. When players like Alexis Lafrenière, Kaapo Kakko and K'Andre Miller reach their second contracts, they could be asking for significant pay raises. Fox has already become an indispensable part of this blue line and has earned an expensive second contract. Teams can get the best return on their investments with second contracts because they ensure payment for current and future performances, rather than past performances, as when signing players later in their careers. The problem, though, is that the team has to balance the books elsewhere when those next contracts come along, which will lead to cuts.

The 2022 offseason becomes particularly tricky with Eichel on the roster. Zibanejad and Ryan Strome are set for unrestricted free agency that summer — The Athletic's Dom Luszczyszyn's model sets Strome's next contract's market value at \$5.7 million a season on average and Zibanejad's at \$7.8 million — and Kakko and Fox will be restricted free agents.

So there would be financial uncertainty inherited in the deal. Still, with the Rangers' timeline in mind, would acquiring a player who could take them to the next level immediately be in their best interest?

Having two "top-line" centers in Eichel and Zibanejad would bolster the team's potential in a league in which center depth is considered to be pivotal for a contender. Teams vying for the Stanley Cup often invest in that area. While the talents don't fully align, Edmonton has \$21 million invested in Connor McDavid and Leon Draisaitl, for example. Toronto is slightly higher, at \$22 million-plus between Auston Matthews and John Tavares. Pittsburgh is just over \$18 million for Sidney Crosby and Evgeni Malkin. Washington is a tier below, at \$17 million between Nick Backstrom and Evgeny Kuznetsov.

Could Eichel and Zibanejad be on that level?

To measure the impact Eichel could have, we should move into the future, as many (including Vogl) have noted that the Sabres would likely be best-served waiting until the offseason to make a deal. First, let's look at how the 2021-22 team projects with the current roster. To do that, we'll use Game Score Value Added, as calculated by Luszczyszyn's model. GSVa is based on game score, which is a single-value statistic that combines box-score stats and analytical metrics. Three years of data go into GSVa and are adjusted for age and weighted by recency. There's room for error in these projections because we're trying to measure uncertainty.

For the 2021-22 season, expiring contracts and incoming prospects were considered for this lineup. Brendan Lemieux (.05 GSVa, signed through 2022) and Julien Gauthier (negative-.33, RFA this offseason) are not featured due to roster limitations. The other wrinkle for next season is the expansion draft; the safe assumption is that one of these players will be on his way to Seattle.

Once a player reaches the NHL, his prospect data is no longer featured in his projections. That's why Kakko's value appears so low — it's based on a tough 2019-20 season, but his rookie year doesn't fully define his career. For that reason, Lafrenière's and Miller's values are both based on their projections before reaching the NHL level, since their GSVa to this point is only so telling.

With every move the Rangers make, their new path to contention has to be contemplated. To give us a baseline for contention and what the team is striving for, we can use Luszczyszyn's "average championship roster" and contender checklist as a blueprint:

As the roster stands, the 2021-22 Rangers project to stack up better to the average contender than in years past. Much of that is because of Fox's development, the projected value of Lafrenière and the subtraction of players like Smith and Johnson.

There is still room for improvement; the middle stands out as an area that could use a lift. If all goes right, the team should have depth on the wings in the top nine that provides balance to the forward group and helps elevate their center strength. However, the Rangers shouldn't be aiming to have some areas compensate for others; they should be striving for the strongest team they can build.

Now let's factor in Eichel. Going into the season, the Sabres captain was projected to add 3.2 wins this year. That number has decreased as the season has progressed, given Buffalo's struggles. But time on a potential playoff team — alongside the likes of Panarin, Kreider or Lafrenière — could change that.

In seasons past, Eichel has shown his ability to be a game-breaker even when surrounded by a subpar roster. Before the 2020-21 season began, he was projected to add 18.5 wins through the remaining years of his contract. To compare, Panarin projected to add 21.1 over the next six seasons of his deal.

Let's look at how this roster would change with the addition of Eichel:

It must be noted that this roster wouldn't be completely intact. There would be subtractions in any trade for Eichel as well as in the Seattle expansion draft. And additions like incoming prospects Nils Lundkvist and Vitali Kravtsov are not certain. All are included in our projections, for the time being. We left out Ryan Strome, who is signed through 2021-22 with a \$4.5 million cap hit and seems like a contract and lineup spot the team could reasonably move to make space for Eichel.

What if it were Zibanejad and not Strome as the odd man out? Strome, who has had a strong past few weeks, projects to a GSVA of 1.5 in 2021-22. If he stays on the team, though, it's also possible that Chytil could move up to the second line. Whether Chytil can handle the expanded role still has to be explored — and should be sooner rather than later.

A year later, in 2022-23, there will be a definite answer about the future in New York for Zibanejad and Strome. Losing one or both unquestionably changes the team's makeup, even with Eichel:

The Rangers probably don't let both walk unless Chytil takes a leap forward. His projection of 0.6 clearly falls below a contender's second-line center, but Luszczyszyn's similarity-score generator helps point out other slow starters who managed to become productive top-six players.

And if Chytil's value does increase and he becomes the Rangers' 2C, that may up the need for a new 3C, depending on who is still on the team by then.

Considering the assets they'd need to give up to get Eichel, and the impact he'll have on their cap space and ability to retain their other top-nine centers, finding an answer inside the organization might be difficult, as would bringing in one from the outside.

Eichel would boost the Rangers' chances of contending immediately. At 24, his on-ice impact would also help keep their contending window open for years. Players of Eichel's caliber aren't often moved, especially not while they're in their prime. That's why the Rangers are going to have to seriously consider a trade.

Beyond the assets it would take to acquire him, much of the decision on an Eichel trade is going to depend on how the Rangers project their current center depth, with Zibanejad, Strome and Chytil. Having a one-two punch of Eichel-Zibanejad would give them the look of a contender, but it also could hamstring their ability to fill other gaps in the lineup.

Given the Rangers' current timeline, their cap situation and the fit Eichel would present on the ice, the timing is right for this type of deal. It would add another spark in their path back to contention. But if the cost is "players,

plus prospects, plus picks," and the subsequent ripple on the roster and cap lasts years, would it be the right move?

Why is Sabres' Rasmus Dahlin playing so poorly this season?

By Bill Hoppe
Olean Times Herald
March 8, 2021

Those brilliant rushes Buffalo Sabres defenseman Rasmus Dahlin showcased as a teenager – he would grab the puck and start controlling the game, dazzling all over the ice with it – have become a rare occurrence.

These days, Dahlin, 20, never seems to have the puck on his stick. The Swede has struggled most of this season, often looking overwhelmed defensively.

Through 23 games, Dahlin is the NHL's clubhouse leader, sporting a ghastly, league-worst minus-21 rating.

In Thursday's 5-2 loss to the New York Islanders, he endured perhaps the worst outing of his 164-game career, compiling a wretched minus-4 mark.

Dahlin, who puts a lot of pressure on himself, looks and sounds beaten down by his struggles and the Sabres' sorry state. They've lost seven straight games and rank last in the NHL entering Tuesday's contest against the Philadelphia Flyers, the finale of their five-game road trip.

"You are allowed to get (ticked) at yourself, you are allowed to ... be angry and stuff," Dahlin said on a Zoom call Friday. "But it's so many games, you have to not think about it, you have to go forward and reload, think about the next game."

Sabres defenseman Rasmus Ristolainen said Dahlin "expects to play at the top level every night."

"I don't think he cares too much about the outside pressure," said Ristolainen, who played three games beside Dahlin last week.

Dahlin, the first overall pick in 2018, looks like he has regressed in his third season. Other than some adroit passing, he has mostly stood out for his defensive mistakes.

In Sunday afternoon's 5-2 loss to the Islanders, he registered a plus-1, his first positive rating since Jan. 18 and just his second this season.

"This league, it's the best league in the world and it's tough for any young player, even a player of his skill set – and, I mean, he is one of the top players in the game with the puck," Sabres general manager Kevyn Adams said. "Offensive or defenseman, it doesn't matter, he's that talented of a kid. So it's tough. You're going to have your ups and downs.

"But I've seen him do some incredible things. You worry about if a player's not having success, does it affect their confidence? Of course, right?"

Sabres coach Ralph Krueger still relies on Dahlin heavily, skating him an average of 21 minutes, 12 seconds an outing. Since defenseman Jake McCabe suffered a season-ending knee injury Feb. 20, Krueger has given Dahlin extra ice time and often utilized him against the opposition's top talent.

But Dahlin, given his hesitancy to rush the puck and move up in the play, has clearly lost some confidence. Krueger benched him once this season, playing him just one 72-second shift over the final 32 minutes on Jan. 22.

"I see a player whose development is stalled," said one scout who has watched Dahlin throughout his career. "Early in his career he showed flashes of brilliance and skill with the puck controlling the play not only on the power play but also five-on-five. For some reason those flashes are few and far between now except on the power play. ...

"He is not handling puck as much five-on-five, struggling with turnovers, and therefore is hurting the team more than helping because he is not controlling the play."

When the 6-foot-3, 207-pound Dahlin spends more time defending, his deficiencies stand out.

"He is not a strong defender or a hard guy to play against to begin with," the scout said. "Every young offensive defender needs to work on his defensive game but he needs to have the leeway somewhat to play to his strengths."

Krueger said without the puck, Dahlin has been learning to manage his energy and "pick his spots to jump into the offense."

"When you're playing 17, 18 minutes, there's more freedom to jump in all the time and he now needs to be more selective when he does get involved offensively and he's getting better at that, too," he said.

Krueger said assistant coach Steve Smith has worked closely with Dahlin "as far as growing and evolving the game without the puck."

"The defensive side of the role that he would need to be able to take on to play those minutes," he said. "We just really like the process with him right now. He is very accountable. If something's off or goes wrong, he's processing it well. He loves the video sessions and his offense remains genius, his first pass remains genius, and he adds so much to our transition game."

—

The Sabres, who have lost 11 of their 13 games since their COVID-19 pause ended, did not practice Monday.

Buffalo Sabres now on pace for fewer wins than Buffalo Bills

By Nick Veronica

WIVB

March 8, 2021

BUFFALO, N.Y. (WIVB) — The Sabres' current seven-game losing streak has dropped them to the bottom of the NHL standings and all but assured the team will miss the playoffs for a 10th straight season, tying a league record.

A year that began with promise fell apart quickly and appears destined to be discarded to the trash heap, along with the last decade of Sabres hockey. But now, thanks to a handful of injuries, snakebitten scorers and an outbreak of COVID-19 within the team, the Sabres are even at risk of winning fewer games than their cross-town counterparts that play the shortest schedule in American professional sports.

With just six wins through 23 games, the Sabres (6-14-3) are on pace for 14.6 wins through the pandemic-shortened 56-game season. The Buffalo Bills, meanwhile, won 15 games this past season en route to an AFC Championship appearance.

An optimist would say things have to turn around for the Sabres soon. The puck has to start finding the back of the net eventually. Captain Jack Eichel has been playing through an injury. Starting goaltender Linus Ullmark could return by the end of the month. The youngsters have showed some promise. They could add someone in a trade. And besides, Jeff Skinner even scored a goal — anything is possible.

Sabres GM Kevyn Adams: 'Unacceptable where we're at'

A pessimist would say we've been hearing that kind of talk for a month now. Plus, the Sabres haven't even played a game against Pittsburgh or Boston yet.

But for now, the Sabres' .326 points percentage would stand as the second-lowest in franchise history — on par with the "tank" season that brought Jack Eichel to Buffalo and was supposed to stop things like this from happening.

AROUND THE PROS: Londoner Jacob Bryson offers rare Buffalo bright spot

By Ryan Pyette

London Free Press

March 8, 2021

Four years ago, Jacob Bryson wasn't sure if he was going to be drafted by an NHL team.

On Saturday against the New York Islanders, the former London Jr. Knights defenceman scored his first NHL goal — 33 seconds in on a shot that handcuffed Semyon Varlamov — and led the Buffalo Sabres with 20 minutes, 48 seconds of ice time.

There isn't a lot of joy around the Buffalo club these days and any hint of swagger is practically non-existent, but when Will Borgen fractured his forearm blocking a shot last month, they called up Bryson from the Rochester Americans.

"His confidence level is extremely high, which this league asks for," Buffalo coach Ralph Krueger told Sabres.com recently. "We're extremely pleased with his puck management."

Bryson was passed over in the Ontario Hockey League draft, but he went on to play for Providence College where he co-captained the Friars to the NCAA Frozen Four championship tournament in Buffalo.

He was a fourth-round selection by then-new Sabres general manager Jason Botterill in the 2017 NHL draft following his freshman season.

Midway through his first American Hockey League season, his Rochester coach Chris Taylor, a former London Knight, made him a healthy scratch and that proved to be a turning point.

"I watched from up top and I kind of gained a lot of confidence that I could be one of the best players out here every game," he told Bill Hoppe of Buffalo Hockey Beat. "I kind of went into every game with that attitude and I think things started to work out for me. I was playing my best hockey in that second half."

AROUND THE PROS: Memorial Cup champ Marc Methot has jumped on the podcast train, putting together The Wally and Methot Show with ex-TSN reporter Brent Wallace. The former Knight will have some stories to share from playing days to retirement and being a dad. He is remembered in London for his overtime winner in the 2005 Cup opener against Rimouski . . . Two-time Stanley Cup winner Patrick Maroon scored his 100th NHL goal over the weekend . . . Nobody who knows the O'Reilly family should be surprised Ryan and Cal's mother Bonnie donated a kidney to Graham Nesbitt, the longtime arena manager at the Seaforth Community Complex. On visiting Bonnie and Brian in Bayfield right before Ryan's Stanley Cup parade two years ago, they told how Nesbitt would allow their boys into the rink when no one else was there for a little extra skating time.