



# **Buffalo Sabres**

## **Daily Press Clips**

*April 17, 2021*

## **Injury to Ullmark further depletes Sabres' goalie depth**

By John Wawrow

Associated Press

April 16, 2021

BUFFALO, N.Y. (AP) — The Buffalo Sabres will be leaning on their fourth, fifth and even sixth-string goalies for potentially the remainder of the season with Linus Ullmark listed week to week with a lower-body injury.

Interim coach Don Granato provided the update on Ullmark on Friday, saying the timetable for his return is "touchy" because the Sabres only have three weeks left in their season. The Sabres sit last in the NHL standings and are all but mathematically out of contention.

Ullmark has missed one game after being shaken up in the opening minutes of a 3-2 shootout loss at Boston on Tuesday. The third-year starter has a 9-6-3 record, and went 4-2-1 in seven games upon returning after missing 15 games with a lower-body injury.

Backup goalie Carter Hutton's status remains cloudy, having missed 13 games with a lower-body injury. Though Hutton has resumed skating on an individual basis, Granato said there is no timetable yet for his return.

The injuries leave the Sabres preparing to call up top minor-league prospect Ukko-Pekka Luukkonen to make his NHL debut. The timetable for that is uncertain with Luukkonen recovering from an injury he sustained earlier this week.

Granato said the team will know more after Luukkonen practices with the AHL Rochester Americans.

The Sabres are currently left with two healthy goalies — Dustin Tokarski and minor-league journeyman Michael Howser — in preparing to host the Pittsburgh Penguins on Saturday and Sunday.

Tokarski stopped 27 shots in a 5-2 win at Washington on Thursday to improve to 1-4-2 this season. It was his first win since stopping 25 shots for Montreal in a 3-1 victory over Ottawa on Dec. 12, 2015.

Howser has never appeared in an NHL game, and was signed last month after Buffalo agreed to trade goalie Jonas Johansson to Colorado.

Veteran forward Kyle Okposo's status is also uncertain. Granato said the team is awaiting test results after Okposo was struck in the face by a puck against Washington.

The latest injuries come the same week in which the Sabres announced captain Jack Eichel will miss the remainder of the season with a herniated disk. Eichel has been out since March 7.

## **Crosby and Pittsburgh take on Buffalo**

Associated Press

April 16, 2021

Pittsburgh Penguins (27-13-3, third in the East Division) vs. Buffalo Sabres (11-25-7, eighth in the East Division)

Buffalo, New York; Saturday, 3 p.m. EDT

FANDUEL SPORTSBOOK LINE: Sabres +215, Penguins -273; over/under is 0

**BOTTOM LINE:** Sidney Crosby and Pittsburgh take on Buffalo. He currently ranks 10th in the in the NHL with 49 points, scoring 17 goals and recording 32 assists.

The Sabres are 11-25-7 against opponents from the East Division. Buffalo has scored 22 power-play goals, converting on 20.6% of chances.

The Penguins are 27-13-3 against the rest of their division. Pittsburgh is fifth in the NHL recording 9.1 points per game, averaging 3.4 goals and 5.7 assists.

In their last meeting on March 25, Pittsburgh won 4-0. Crosby recorded a team-high 3 points for the Penguins.

**TOP PERFORMERS:** Rasmus Asplund leads the Sabres with a plus-five in 15 games this season. Casey Mittelstadt has six goals and two assists over the last 10 games for Buffalo.

Jake Guentzel leads the Penguins with 20 goals and has 45 points. Crosby has four goals and 11 assists over the last 10 games for Pittsburgh.

**LAST 10 GAMES:** Sabres: 5-2-3, averaging 3.6 goals, 5.4 assists, three penalties and 6.6 penalty minutes while giving up 2.9 goals per game with a .917 save percentage.

Penguins: 7-2-1, averaging 4.2 goals, 7.9 assists, 3.6 penalties and 7.5 penalty minutes while giving up 2.8 goals per game with a .902 save percentage.

**INJURIES:** Sabres: Kyle Okposo: day to day (undisclosed), Riley Sheahan: day to day (undisclosed), Carter Hutton: out (lower body), Jake McCabe: out (knee), Will Borgen: out (forearm), Jack Eichel: out for season (neck), Linus Ullmark: day to day (undisclosed).

Penguins: Frederick Gaudreau: out (lower body), Teddy Blueger: day to day (upper body).

## **Sabres' Cozens wants to help more offensively in final weeks of rookie season**

By Lance Lysowski

The Buffalo News

April 16, 2021

Dylan Cozens was in the visitors' dressing room with his Buffalo Sabres teammates while the Washington Capitals honored future Hall of Fame center Nicklas Backstrom with a video tribute and ceremony ahead of his 1,000th NHL game Thursday night.

Cozens, a 20-year-old rookie, was mentally preparing to start the game for the Sabres, pivoting a forward line alongside fellow up-and-coming forwards Anders Bjork and Arttu Ruotsalainen. Hours earlier, interim coach Don Granato urged the trio to not pay any attention to the opposition, no matter how accomplished or talented they may be.

The moment was not too big for Cozens following the pregame pageantry inside Capital One Arena. Backstrom won the opening faceoff ahead of the two teams' final matchup this season, but it was Cozens who led the Sabres to a 5-2 win over the Cup-contending Capitals.

Cozens, appearing in his 28th game during a trying first season in the NHL, assisted on two goals, including a key second-period one-timer by Bjork, to help the Sabres improve to 5-2-3 in their last 10 games.

"Obviously, my rookie year being in the NHL, the first thing I wanted to do was just prove I can play at this level, show that I was responsible defensively," Cozens said following practice Friday in KeyBank Center. "Once I kind of showed that, I think I want to take the next step in my offensive game. Obviously, I've had a lot of things going on this season, but I've been able to watch a lot of games and just learn from watching. I'm happy where my game is at right now."

The road to a prominent role was dotted with potholes for the former seventh overall draft pick. Between Cozens' time with Canada ahead of the IIHF World Junior Championship and the Sabres' two-week Covid-19 pause, he has quarantined alone in a hotel for almost a month.

Cozens missed three games after being one of nine Sabres placed on the NHL's Covid-19 protocol list in February. He also sat for a combined 10 games because of separate upper-body injuries, including a recent six-game absence stemming from a hit by Philadelphia Flyers defenseman Philippe Myers.

Cozens was incensed after the latest injury. From March 2020 through mid-July, Cozens used the terrain around his hometown, Whitehorse, Yukon, to build the necessary strength to endure the grind of a full NHL season. No amount of on-ice training can prepare a player for a truncated 56-game schedule that has impacted recovery, though.

The latest setback did not linger. Cozens has been exceptional in three games since returning to the lineup, collecting four assists while averaging 15:46 of ice time and using his speed to beat even the most talented opponents, including Backstrom.

During that span, Cozens has been on the ice for five goals at 5-on-5 and owns an impressive 54.4% on-ice 5-on-5 shot attempt differential. He ranked third among all Sabres forwards in on-ice 5-on-5 shot quality share, trailing only Bjork and Jeff Skinner. Cozens was also fourth among forwards in ice time in those situations.

"He has explosive speed, which I think we're seeing more and more of," Granato said. "It's been evident to us just in the last few weeks. We're seeing him explode, and that speed discrepancy of speed between him and his competitors is much more impactful, much more evident and easy to see."

On Thursday night against the playoff-ready Capitals, Cozens had an 85.71% 5-on-5 shot attempt differential and 87.63% 5-on-5 on-ice shot quality share against Backstrom, a 33-year-old center with 972 career points in 14 NHL seasons.

Cozens' offensive talents have emerged more frequently now that he knows how to defend in the NHL. While Cozens has only four goals and six assists, he ranks fifth among all qualifying Sabres forwards (at least 20 games

played) this season in Evolving-Hockey.com's metric goals above replacement, which places a value on a player's overall contributions to a team.

His growth has been noticeable recently, beginning Sunday afternoon in his first game back. Cozens chased down a loose puck after a Flyers turnover and skated to the high slot before passing to Ruotsalainen, whose one-timer from the right circle tied the score in the second period.

"He's told us don't worry about making mistakes," Cozens said of Granato. "Go out and use your skills and play. That's what we're doing. It's development for us right now. Just getting better and trying to reach our ceiling. We're just going out there and playing with lots of confidence. It's a lot of fun to play right now."

With the Sabres clinging to a one-goal lead Thursday, Cozens retrieved a puck in the left circle of the offensive zone, turned around and sent a five-foot pass to Bjork, who made it 4-2 with a one-timer that beat goalie Vitek Vanecek short side.

"He's a great player," said Bjork, who described Cozens as a "workhorse." "He's tenacious. He has incredible skill. I think that will continue to show."

With first-line center Jack Eichel out for the season and Curtis Lazar traded to Boston, Cozens will get valuable reps at center over the Sabres' final 13 games. It's another chapter in a well-executed development plan by the Sabres, who chose to have Cozens begin his NHL career at right wing alongside former Stanley Cup champion Eric Staal.

Cozens was tasked with learning the nuances of defending at this level and showed he can make an impact in the top or bottom six. He wasn't moved to center until March 8, the day after Eichel suffered what would be a season-ending injury. In addition to promising underlying metrics at center, Cozens has won 53.4% of his faceoffs.

"I think that was really good for me," Cozens said of starting at right wing. "There's lots of responsibility playing center, and I had just been coming on the wing learning the speed of the game and learning how to defend on the wing. It was big for me to start and once I gained more confidence, moving to center was good for me. That's the position I want to play, so I'm happy to be there right now."

Though Cozens is averaging only 13:40 of ice time per game, those minutes are likely to increase as he moves further from the injury. A prominent role is even more impactful this season because all of the remaining games are against teams in the playoff picture or pushing to make the East Division's top four: Boston, Pittsburgh, the New York Islanders and New York Rangers.

As challenging as this season has been at times for Cozens, trades and injuries will provide the Sabres with time to see what their promising young center can accomplish against some of the NHL's best.

"I think we've been playing some really good hockey lately," Cozens said. "The younger guys are getting lots of opportunities, so we're just trying to grab that opportunity. It makes us work that much harder when we know there's ice time for us on the table and all that stuff. Real happy with where our game is going, and we want to finish the season with the way we've been playing lately."

## **Sabres starting goalie Linus Ullmark 'week to week' with a lower-body injury**

By Lance Lysowski

The Buffalo News

April 16, 2021

Linus Ullmark might not recover from a lower-body injury in time to return for the Buffalo Sabres this season.

Ullmark, the Sabres' 27-year-old starting goalie, is considered "week to week" – according to interim coach Don Granato – after exiting in the first period of a 3-2 shootout loss to the Boston Bruins on Tuesday in TD Garden.

That uncertainty makes it possible that Ullmark won't be back before the regular-season finale May 8 in Pittsburgh. Buffalo (11-25-7) has only 13 games remaining and this latest setback for Ullmark came at a difficult time.

Ullmark's typical backup, Carter Hutton, has been out with a lower-body injury since March 22. Hutton recently resumed skating, but there is no timeline for his return because the medical staff must evaluate how he recovers from each on-ice workout.

That leaves Dustin Tokarski and Michael Houser as the Sabres' only healthy goalies on the active roster ahead of a back-to-back series against the Pittsburgh Penguins in KeyBank Center on Saturday and Sunday. Puck drop for both games is scheduled for 3 p.m., and the Saturday matinee will be broadcast on NBC.

"Ullmark is a more challenging one right now because it's week to week, and you look at the number of weeks left in our season," Granato said. "So that one's a little touchy."

General Manager Kevyn Adams expressed hope Thursday that top goaltending prospect Ukko-Pekka Luukkonen will recover from a lower-body injury in time to play one of the two games against Pittsburgh. However, the Sabres are still assessing Luukkonen's recovery.

The Sabres need at least three healthy goalies between the active roster and taxi squad for each game day, although the National Hockey League granted the team an exemption Thursday.

It's safe to assume Tokarski will get the start Saturday, as the 31-year-old is coming off his first NHL win since Dec. 12, 2015. Prior to this season, Tokarski had not appeared in an NHL game since Oct. 28, 2016. He's spent the bulk of his professional career in the American Hockey League, winning a pair of Calder Cups.

Tokarski, who joined the Sabres on a two-year contract because the team needed a goalie to expose in the Seattle expansion draft, has a .908 save percentage in seven NHL games this season. He stopped 27 of 29 shots in the 5-2 win over the Washington Capitals on Thursday night.

"It's been quite the season for everybody, but it showed (Thursday) in the grit and the passion," Tokarski said. "This team has a bunch of gamers in it. I think there's a bright future here."

Tokarski has started back-to-back games for the Sabres this season, a pair of losses to the Penguins in Pittsburgh. If Granato chooses to not go that route, Buffalo will have to turn to Houser or Luukkonen.

Houser, 28, has never appeared in an NHL game and hasn't played in more than one AHL game in any season since 2015-16. He's spent most of his pro career in the ECHL, logging a .902 save percentage in 26 games with the Cincinnati Cyclones last season.

Luukkonen, 22, has posted an underwhelming .888 save percentage playing behind a thin Rochester roster this season. The former second-round draft pick has a 3.60 goals-against average in 14 games. In six games since returning from the Amerks' Covid-19 pause, Luukkonen has an .863 save percentage.

The Sabres wanted to give Luukkonen a spot start or two in the season's final weeks, but it's unclear if this lower-body injury, the severity of which has him considered "day to day," according to Adams, might prevent that from happening this weekend.

Ullmark, meanwhile, is entering a key offseason having already missed 16 games because of separate injuries. He's missed 34 games over the past two years. Ullmark, though, has been strong when on the ice, as his .937 save percentage at 5-on-5 ranks fourth among all goalies to appear in at least 20 games this season.

The Sabres opted to not trade Ullmark ahead of last's Monday deadline, as Adams has prioritized signing the pending unrestricted free agent to a new contract.

#### Other updates

Winger Kyle Okposo was examined by doctors Friday after suffering a facial laceration when he was struck by defenseman Matt Irwin's errant dump-in attempt in the first period Thursday in Washington.

The diagnosis stemming from that evaluation will determine Okposo's availability. The 33-year-old has 10 points in his last 13 games.

Forward Riley Sheahan (upper body) also didn't practice Friday and remains day to day with soreness stemming from a hit Tuesday night in Boston. Sheahan managed to come back to play the second period, only to miss the third period and the game Thursday.

If neither player is available Saturday, Granato could turn to Jean-Sebastien Dea or C.J. Smith, both of whom are currently on the taxi squad.

#### Looking ahead

The Penguins are 9-2-2 in their last 13 games, vaulting Sidney Crosby and company into third in the East Division, only three points behind the first-place Capitals. Pittsburgh remains without forwards Evgeni Malkin, Kasper Kapanen and Brandon Tanev.

Pittsburgh has points in 23 of its last 25 games against the Sabres. Overlooking Buffalo isn't an option, said Penguins coach Mike Sullivan.

"I look at this team that has a lot of skill, they've got some young talent that's playing with a lot of enthusiasm and in a lot of ways when they're in the circumstance that they're in and they made some trades at the deadline, they're playing the game with a free spirit," Sullivan said of the Sabres. "Those are dangerous teams to play against. We're going to have to bring our very best. We know that."

## **Linus Ullmark out week-to-week with lower-body injury**

By Brayton J. Wilson

WGR 550

April 16, 2021

Buffalo Sabres interim head coach Don Granato did not sound very optimistic about his No. 1 goalie's outlook for the rest of the 2020-21 season.

Granato confirmed on Friday that goalie Linus Ullmark is out on a week-to-week basis with a lower-body injury, but acknowledged that there are only so many weeks left in the season. Buffalo only has 13 games remaining over the next four weeks, with the regular season finale set for Saturday, May 8 against the Pittsburgh Penguins.

The 27-year-old netminder was forced to leave Tuesday night's game against the Boston Bruins just 4:54 into the contest after he appeared to be in discomfort after making a save.

Ullmark just returned from a lower-body injury back on March 27 that forced him to miss more than a month of game action. In his eight games played during that span, Ullmark played very well with a 4-2-1 record, a 2.94 goals-against average and a .915 save percentage.

Overall this season, Ullmark had earned nine of Buffalo's 11 total wins, going 9-6-3 with a 2.63 goals-against average and .917 save percentage.

Dustin Tokarski was forced to enter Tuesday's game and played very well, making 29 saves on 31 shots faced in the final 60:06 of game time to help earn Buffalo a point in a 3-2 shootout loss.

Thursday night saw Tokarski back in goal against the Washington Capitals, where he made 27 saves on 29 shots faced to earn his first win in the National Hockey League since Dec. 12, 2015. The Sabres managed to close out their season series with the Capitals with a 5-2 win at Capital One Arena.

Tokarski has played admirably in his limited action this season, going 1-4-2 in his seven games played with a 3.32 goals-against average and a .908 save percentage.

The starting net will likely belong to Tokarski for the time being with Michael Houser serving as his backup.

Granato did provide some, perhaps, promising news pertaining to Carter Hutton, as the veteran goalie is back on the ice skating on his own. However, the team does not have much information right now on a timetable for a possible return for Hutton.

The 35-year-old netminder is rehabbing a lower-body injury suffered back on March 22 early in a game against the New York Rangers.

Granato was also asked on Friday about the status of goalie Ukko-Pekka Luukkonen, who has not been on the ice much in Rochester as he is dealing with an injury of his own. The interim head coach says there will be a determination on Luukkonen's status later Friday, but the team wants to try and get him back in Buffalo so they can integrate him at some point this weekend.

So far this season with the Rochester Americans, Luukkonen has had his ups-and-downs with a 7-5-2 record in 14 games played with a 3.60 goals-against average and an .888 save percentage.

There were a couple other injury updates from Granato on Friday:

- Kyle Okposo is visiting with doctors on Friday and should have more details on his status on Saturday. The veteran forward left Thursday's game near the halfway point of the first period after taking a dump-in attempt by defenseman Matt Irwin to the head.

- Riley Sheahan remains day-to-day with upper-body "soreness" after leaving Tuesday's night game against the Bruins. Granato says they will continue to evaluate his status each day as he continues to make progress, but he still has a ways to go.



The Sabres were back on the ice on Friday as the team gets ready to face the Penguins on Saturday afternoon at KeyBank Center. Faceoff is set for 3 p.m. ET for the first of a two-game weekend set with Pittsburgh in Buffalo.

A reminder that Saturday's game will be televised on NBC, so the only place to catch all your pregame coverage (2 p.m. ET with Brian Koziol) and the play-by-play call with Dan Dunleavy and Rob Ray is on the radio home of the Sabres - WGR Sports Radio 550.

## **Don Granato has breathed life into the Sabres this season, but is he the right coach for their future?**

By John Vogl  
The Athletic  
April 16, 2021

Don Granato is winning. He's winning games. He's winning interviews. He's winning over fans.

Will he win the Sabres' coaching job?

It's still to be determined if Granato is Mr. Right, but he's marvelous as Mr. Right Now. Buffalo's interim coach has resurrected a deceased team, injected life into flatlining players and put fun into a space where none existed.

"It's like every other work environment," Granato said. "We can all relate to this. If you go to work and you don't enjoy it and you just feel bad walking in the place you have to go every day, you're not going to be good. You're not going to be good at what you do or you're not going to be as good as you can be.

"We've needed to make sure fun is a part of it."

Oh, it's been fun, all right. The players have enjoyed success. They've loved playing hockey rather than a system. They've appreciated being trusted.

"Our confidence raises every game," said blossoming defenseman Rasmus Dahlin. "We all believe in each other."

Not that anyone needs reminding, but the Sabres were a miserable disaster with overmatched coach Ralph Krueger. And they knew they were a miserable disaster. When general manager Kevyn Adams finally fired Krueger on March 17, any replacement was guaranteed to be the Sabres' best coach of the season.

But who could have guessed Granato would also be a better motivator than the world-traveling paid spokesman who wrote a book on leadership?

"I asked them: Do you need to win to be confident? Are you only going to be confident because you just won?" Granato said. "You have to believe before things happen, not after. We don't need wins to be confident. Be confident before you win."

That quote is the exact opposite of what Buffalo heard day after day from Krueger. He said the team was losing because it wasn't confident.

In fact, almost everything Granato says and does is contrary to Krueger.

The former coach demanded adherence to his defensive principles.

"I love offense, and I love to focus on offense," Granato said.

Krueger blamed losses on the players' inability to follow his system.

"We know if we just play a system and you focus on trying to play that system, you're really not improving your skill or your ability at the NHL level," Granato said.

Krueger put shackles on his offensively gifted players, especially Dahlin.

"I've spoken with Rasmus quite a bit," Granato said, "giving him the green light."

The fired coach stuck with the same players in the same roles even when it failed. Granato has used 12 skaters in one overtime, including six who were age 23 and under.

"I want to get film on different guys in that situation," Granato said. "I want to put them in a situation where there's pressure to win or lose a game."

Krueger buried former 40-goal scorer Jeff Skinner in the bottom six and the press box while belittling his skills. Granato has slotted Skinner on the top line and seen results.

"It's nice to see him smile," Granato said. "You've got to be able to enjoy the moments. He's finding a way to do that more. It's nice to see that because it's the only way he's going to play at his peak."

The public rebukes of Krueger's failings, combined with watchable hockey, have reinvigorated members of the fan base and made Granato an increasingly adored figure.

"I don't spend too much time on that," he said with an aw-shucks grin. "But I do feel a responsibility to the fans and the Sabres contingent. We're in the entertainment business. It should be entertaining. I want to be entertained, you know? So, I can only imagine the fans."

"That was one thing that I had in mind was to make our games more intriguing, interesting, fun and entertaining with every team I've coached. This is no different. I'm not trying to coach necessarily to this situation. I'm just coaching the way I coach. That's always been my philosophy and my approach to it."

"We all love the game, so let's play it at a level that we can enjoy."

The fun times extend to the back rooms of Buffalo's arena. Granato is riding the adrenaline of his first NHL head coaching job. His energy is constantly on display. He swings by the weight room for a brief tap of encouragement. He offers constructive, upbeat words during film study.

The 53-year-old is in tune with whatever message needs to be presented, and he nails the delivery.

"He's very encouraging with his teaching, which is great," said trade-acquisition Anders Bjork. "Guys respond really well to it. The guys kind of told me when I came here, 'We're a lot different team right now. We're transitioning quick, playing hard, making a lot of plays.'"

"That's a huge credit to him. He's taught these guys well."

The Sabres are indeed a different team. They averaged an NHL-worst 2.07 goals under Krueger but are scoring nearly a goal more with Granato. Krueger had four regulation wins in his final 35 games. As Granato approached his one-month anniversary, he'd posted four regulation wins in his last nine games while going 5-2-2.

"I like the style we've been able to play," leading scorer Sam Reinhart said. "We've been able to skate more and play a faster game."

"Everyone on the ice knows what they're supposed to do at any time," defenseman Rasmus Ristolainen said. "There is less chaos in the D-zone and we are not running around."

"Things are a little bit more predictable for the goalie to be able to know where shots are coming, a little less backdoor, wide-open plays," said netminder Dustin Tokarski.

While Krueger promised pace, Granato is actually pushing it.

"What I see right now out of our team is a team that's playing with purpose," Adams said. "I see a bit more structure to our team. Defensively, we look more on our toes, pressuring. And we have more of an understanding of the why. Why are we doing certain things?"

"And then on the offensive side, I think I saw before maybe a team that was caught in the middle. We had a lot of talented players, but we were kind of just this in-between, it felt like. Now we're a bit more on our toes, and I feel like our D are freed up to be getting up ice."

Basically, Granato is putting the game in the players' hands rather than believing a system will get things done.

"You look at a team that wins the Stanley Cup, and they run a system," Granato said. "You might think, 'They won the Cup. That system's great,' and 10 other teams switch to it. And then the next five years, that team doesn't win another Stanley Cup."

"Well, it's not the system. It's the skill. Any system you want to run is going to run better with more skill. Our focus is on the more skill. We have a system, and we know darn well it's going to work better the better we get and the more we increase the skill."

Granato has coaxed individual improvements across the lineup, especially with players many had written off. Casey Mittelstadt had a stretch of six goals in nine games. Tage Thompson enjoyed three goals in five games. Dahlin had points in six of seven, and Henri Jokiharju reached the scoresheet in four of five. Skinner found the net twice in three games and added an assist in the fourth.

"Any player wants to have the trust of the coach or (know) the coach believes in them and thinks they can be an impact player and help the team win," Skinner said.

It strains credulity that Granato served as Krueger's assistant for parts of two seasons. But the Illinois native had his coaching base set well before joining Krueger.

The brother of Tony and Cammi Granato played college hockey at Wisconsin, then started behind the bench in 1993. He's served as a head coach in the United States Hockey League, ECHL, American Hockey League, international tournaments and for the U.S. National Team Development Program.

Granato worked as an assistant for Wisconsin and the Chicago Blackhawks before joining the Sabres last season.

"He's always been good at developing players, and I think that helps," Thompson said. "We've got a lot of young guys. Just like his role at U-18, developing guys and making them better players, (we're) working on crafting our game, not just talking all systems but all assets of the game."

Granato credits interim assistants Matt Ellis and Dan Girardi with helping him resuscitate the organization. No one knew what to expect when the three men stepped into roles they'd never held. The turnaround has been something to behold.

Is it enough for Granato to have the interim tag removed when Adams conducts his coaching search?

"I always felt that Donny should be part of this conversation regardless of what happens exactly with the wins and losses," the GM said. "Donny Granato is a person that I absolutely think is in the mix for this.

"But I do think it's important to just have conversations and think about where we go from here."

A wide-ranging interview process is certainly best for the organization. Adams needs to get this coaching hire right because he may not get a second one. There are plenty of impressive candidates out there.

Only one has breathed life into the Sabres, and he's not done yet.

"You can never be content," Granato said. "As much fun as you have, you know not to be content. That's how we approach it.

"We can all get better. To me, that's the driving force of what I want our coaching staff to do is find ways that we can make everybody better. Who doesn't like becoming better?"

## **Sabres rookie Dylan Cozens showcasing offense, emerging as special talent**

By Bill Hoppe

Olean Times Herald

April 16, 2021

BUFFALO – Sabres rookie center Dylan Cozens has quickly reached another phase of his development, adding slick playmaking to his repertoire.

Since Cozens, 20, returned from an upper-body injury Sunday, he has recorded four assists, two more than he compiled in his first 25 games.

Thursday's 5-2 win over the Washington Capitals was arguably Cozens' best NHL outing. The Yukon native registered two primary assists, creating goals for wingers Sam Reinhart and Anders Bjork.

The 6-foot-3, 188-pound Cozens also pumped a career-high four shots on goal and generated a team-high 75% Corsi For, according to NaturalStatTrick.com.

The Sabres, who host the Pittsburgh Penguins on Saturday afternoon, eased Cozens into the lineup earlier this season, playing him at right wing instead of center, his natural position. They also occasionally scratched him so he could rest.

"There's lots of responsibility playing center and I had just been coming on the wing learning the speed of the game and learning how to defend on the wing," Cozens said on a Zoom call following Friday's practice at KeyBank Center. "It was big for me to start and once I gained more confidence, moving to was center was good for me.

"That's the position I want to play, so I'm happy to be there right now."

Just 28 games into his career, Cozens has emerged as one of the Sabres' top forwards, earning interim coach Don Granato's trust. Cozens, the seventh overall pick in 2019, has played center almost exclusively under Granato.

"The first thing I wanted to do was just prove I can play at this level, show that I was responsible defensively," Cozens said. "Once I kind of showed that I think I want to take the next step in my offensive game."

Cozens has showcased rapid growth despite battling two upper-body injuries and testing positive for COVID-19. He has missed 15 total games.

"I've had a lot of things going on this season, but I've been able to watch a lot of games and just learn from watching," said Cozens, who has scored four goals this season. "I'm happy where my game is at right now."

Granato said Cozens' ability to internalize things has helped buoy him.

"You can discuss something with him in between a period or show him a clip, and he can go out and change it immediately," he said. "He doesn't need three practices to do it."

He added: "I don't know if there's any one big area (he has improved). It seems like every area that's kind of a necessity or real key area to progress-development, he's made incremental improvements."

A slew of young players have improved under Granato, developing more confidence than they possessed under Ralph Krueger, who was fired March 17.

Defenseman Rasmus Dahlin, 21, has started dazzling with the puck again and making game-changing plays. Center Casey Mittelstadt, 22, has morphed into perhaps the Sabres' top offensive threat. The list goes on.

Clearly, Granato has the Sabres playing to their strengths.

"The young guys have been great for our team right now," Cozens said. "They're playing with a lot of confidence. We're just going out there and playing and having fun. We're not worried about making mistakes. We're just going out there and playing loose and using our skill."

"These last few games for me have been a lot of fun and it's been fun to watch the team over this last little bit."

Cozens has spent the last two games pivoting Bjork, who was acquired from the Boston Bruins on Monday, and rookie Arttu Ruotsalainen.

Bjork scored his first goal Thursday, one-timing Cozens' short pass in the left circle.

"That pass from Cozens was great," Bjork said following the game. "He's a workhorse, as the other guys kind of say. He found that puck and put it right on my tape and I was able to get a quick shot off."

Cozens' line generated a team-high 69.2 Corsi For, according to NaturalStatTrick.com.

"Our chemistry has been really good," Cozens said of his line. "Bjorkie's been great. He works so hard hunting the puck down, and Arttu's so smart with the puck and making plays. It's been great playing with those two guys. We're a confident line right now."

## **Sabres' goalie picture for weekend still unclear; Linus Ullmark week to week**

By Bill Hoppe

Olean Times Herald

April 16, 2021

**BUFFALO** – Sabres goalie Linus Ullmark is week to week with a lower-body injury, interim coach Don Granato said this afternoon.

So, does that mean Ukko-Pekka Luukkonen will be recalled? General manager Kevyn Adams said Thursday the top goalie prospect could make his NHL debut this weekend.

Luukkonen, 22, hasn't been summoned yet. Granato said the Sabres would determine his status later today. The Finn has been recovering from a lower-body injury and missed the Rochester Americans' last game.

The Sabres need to add a goalie to their taxi squad.

"We're clearly trying to get him integrated with us," Granato said on a Zoom call following this afternoon's practice.

The Sabres host the Pittsburgh Penguins on Saturday and Sunday afternoons at KeyBank Center.

Adams said the Sabres used an emergency backup as their taxi-squad goalie for Thursday's 5-2 road win over the Washington Capitals.

The Sabres lost all 15 games Ullmark recently missed recovering from a lower-body injury. He has emerged as their MVP and backbone, recording nine of their 11 wins this season.

The Swede left Tuesday's 3-2 shootout loss to the Boston Bruins after gloving a puck 4:54 into the game.

"It's week to week and we don't have many weeks left," Granato said of Ullmark's injury. "So that one's a little touchy."

The Sabres have 13 games left over the next three weeks.

Goalie Dustin Tokarski played Thursday, earning his first win since Dec. 12, 2015. Michael Houser, who has no NHL playing experience, backed him up.

Meanwhile, Granato said goalie Carter Hutton, who has missed the last 13 games battling a lower-body injury, has started skating again.

"As he uses his body more, we'll be able to tell where he's at more," Granato said. "So there's no real information other than he's currently skating."

In other injury news, forwards Kyle Okposo and Riley Sheahan both missed today's practice.

Okposo missed Thursday's game early after teammate Matt Irwin's shoot-in hit him in the left ear.

Granato said Okposo was visiting doctor today and the Sabres will have more information Saturday.

Meanwhile, Granato said Sheahan is day to day with "soreness" after taking a hit Tuesday.

## **Newly confident Sabres set to host Penguins**

CBS Sports

April 16, 2021

The Buffalo Sabres will welcome the Pittsburgh Penguins for back-to-back matinees Saturday and Sunday, and "welcome" is oddly an appropriate term.

The Sabres, last in the East Division after a mostly forgettable season that has included an 18-game losing streak, not only are 5-2-3 in their past 10 games, they are coming off a game Thursday when they knocked off the division-leading Washington Capitals 5-2.

Even though the Sabres are 0-4-0 against the Penguins this season, they have not faced each other in nearly a month, and Buffalo sees itself as a rapidly improving team.

The Penguins, sitting third in the East but hotly in contention for the division title, probably won't seem so big and bad to Buffalo, which finally has some confidence.

"The guys were incredible," winning goaltender Dustin Tokarski said after the victory over the Capitals. "It's been quite the season for everybody, but it showed in the grit and the passion. This team has a bunch of gamers in it. I think there's a bright future here."

The Sabres' youth movement shined through Thursday. Sam Reinhart, Victor Olofsson, Casey Mittelstadt, Anders Bjork and Tage Thompson scored -- all are under 26 -- and Dylan Cozens, 20, had two assists.

Buffalo interim coach Don Granato cautioned that one decent run or one dragon-slaying win isn't the end of the story -- "We want to keep improving and getting better," he said -- but he acknowledged that, "When you watch your players enjoy and immerse in the moment because they're enjoying the moment, it's hard not to have fun."

"Sometimes you let the outcome and (concern) about the outcome interfere," Granato said. "Our guys are not worried about the outcome. Just immerse in the moment and trust that it's going to work out."

Pittsburgh is concerned about the outcome of every game with less than a month left in the regular season and working toward a division title -- or at least playoff position.

The Penguins have won eight of their past 11 games and are coming off a 2-1 shootout loss Thursday against another non-playoff team, Philadelphia.

Despite losing the extra point in the shootout, the Penguins, like the Sabres, are in pretty high spirits.

Part of that comes from a solid Pittsburgh debut Thursday for veteran forward Jeff Carter. He was the only addition the team made at the trade deadline, in a deal with Los Angeles for draft picks. No one was dealt away, leaving intact what seems to be good team chemistry.

Carter centered the second line, flanked by Jared McCann and Jason Zucker with Evgeni Malkin out because of injury, and got power-play and penalty-killing time.

"I think in the first period, I felt like I was kind of standing still thinking about systems and stuff like that and trying to figure out where I was supposed to go," Carter said. "The second period, I think I just started to play hockey and use my speed. That's when we started creating some chances as a line. From there on, we did a pretty good job of keeping things going north and attacking the net."

"It was something to build on for sure."

Buffalo and Pittsburgh have partnered for Saturday to hold the NHL's first joint Pride Game.



## **NHL On NBC: How coaching change is helping Sabres finish strong**

By Adam Gretz

NBC Sports

April 17, 2021

NBC's coverage of the 2020-21 NHL season continues with Saturday's matchup between the Pittsburgh Penguins and Buffalo Sabres. Penguins-Sabres stream coverage begins at 3 p.m. ET on NBC. You can watch the game online and on the NBC Sports app by clicking [here](#).

It might be an understatement to say the 2020-21 season has been a major disappointment for the Sabres.

After making a couple of big splashes in the offseason to add Taylor Hall and Eric Staal to the lineup, pretty much everything went wrong for the roster once the puck dropped on the season and things quickly devolved into chaos. The Sabres enter Saturday's game against the Penguins with the league's worst record and are set to miss the Stanley Cup Playoffs for the 10th year in a row. The organization probably needs a rebuild to recover from its previous rebuild.

Jack Eichel is done for the season. Hall and Staal were traded before the trade deadline. The remaining roster is simply playing out the season for pride.

The funny thing is, they might be currently playing their best hockey of the season. It all started with the coaching change that saw Don Granato replace Ralph Krueger.

While their 5-7-3 mark under Granato might not look all that impressive, keep in mind they only won six out of 28 games under Krueger and were 2-12-1 in his final 15 games with the team. They are also 5-2-3 in their most recent 10 games with wins over the Flyers (two), Rangers, and Capitals during that stretch.

So what has changed under Granato over the past 10-15 games that has prompted such a dramatic turnaround?

A lot of it might come down to the approach and some simple player usage.

For starters, while Krueger had the Sabres' young players tied down in a defensive-minded system that demolished their creativity, Granato has turned the team loose and has put an emphasis on the team enjoying the way it plays. He said earlier this week that he loves offense and loves to "focus" on offense, while also saying this, via *The Athletic* (subscription required) regarding players improving their skill: "We know if we just play a system and you focus on trying to play that system, you're really not improving your skill or your ability at the NHL level."

That sort of approach would have never happened under Krueger's watch.

Along with that, certain individual players have been given more responsibility and more freedom to make plays, specifically second-year defenseman Rasmus Dahlin.

Dahlin, the No. 1 overall pick from two years ago, had badly regressed in the first half of the season and seemed nothing like the player he was during his rookie year. That has changed under Granato, with Dahlin responding with three goals and four assists over the past 15 games.

The other major change has involved younger (and more talented) players getting a bigger role.

The centerpiece of that change might be Casey Mittelstadt, who seems to have found his game recently under Granato. Prior to the coaching change Mittelstadt was buried on the roster and playing a minimal role, never really getting any sort of a chance to make an impact. He was averaging just 13 minutes per game and had just one goal and four assists over 13 games.

Under Granato, Mittelstadt has jumped up to nearly 17 minutes per game and already has six goals and two assists while becoming one of their go-to offensive players.

Jeff Skinner and Tage Thompson have also seen increased roles in Granato's push to improve the offense.

The biggest change though just might be a case of good timing for Granato due to the return of a healthy Linus Ullmark in goal.

Ullmark missed almost all of the games during the Sabres' losing streak. It was a significant development given how much better the Sabres have been with Ullmark in net. In his 20 games the Sabres have a 9-6-3 record. They are only 2-19-4 without him.

Give Granato a capable NHL goal, combined with his desire to push the offense and give bigger, more stable roles to the team's most talented players and you suddenly have a more confident, exciting team.

The Sabres still have a long way to go before they can contend, and a 10-game stretch after a coaching change in the middle of a lost season does not do anything to change that. But it is still an encouraging development that this group has not quit, and that Granato has at least given management a reason to seriously consider him as the team's next full-time coach.

## **Anders Bjork begins Sabres career like a player with something to prove**

By Marisa Ingemi

NBC Sports

April 16, 2021

In his last five games with the Bruins, Anders Bjork didn't play.

It was clear his time in Boston was coming to an end. This had been a pattern for young, skilled Bruins forwards who didn't pan out in their system; Frank Vatrano was sent to the Panthers in 2018, and then Ryan Donato was sent to Minnesota in 2019, and Danton Heinen moved on last year.

There's a longer history, going back to Blake Wheeler to then-Atlanta in 2011, but under the Bruce Cassidy/Don Sweeney Bruins, there's plenty of their own examples.

The 24-year-old Bjork was one of the pieces sent to Buffalo in the Taylor Hall trade, along with a second round draft pick. His first game with the Sabres came in the building he just spent a lot of time watching the Bruins in.

He picked up an assist on Buffalo's opening goal that night. In his second game, though, a 5-2 win over the Capitals, he broke out like a player who has something to prove.

"It takes some pressure off for sure," Bjork said afterward. "It's going to take a couple games for me to find my stride and figure out how I can best play in this system. The coaches have done a great job already showing me video."

His 18:40 time on ice on Thursday night was the most he had played since November 8, 2017 when he skated for 18:46 with the Bruins. Minutes had been tough to come by and the leash was short. He averaged 12:30 of ice time in 138 regular season games in his Bruins career.

Bjork had plenty of frustrating moments with Boston. He dealt with two shoulder surgeries that were the result of playing on his off wing. He didn't get to be at the Winter Classic at his alma mater Notre Dame after being sent to Providence and dealing with his second shoulder injury.

[Your 2020-21 NHL on NBC TV schedule]

He did as the Bruins asked, improving his defensive game and playing out of his natural position often, but the offense never came, if he even had a chance to find consistency on any line.

He left Notre Dame after three seasons as one of the best scorers in the nation. That offensive touch never became a consistent scoring threat with the Bruins as he recovered from injuries and fought for his spot.

That wasn't going to come in Boston; he finished his Bruins season with the third-fewest offensive-zone starts at five-on-five among Bruins forwards who played in at least 20 games this season.

"There's opportunity. It's a fresh start for me," he said after he got traded. "I don't think my time in the NHL has gone the way I wanted it, but this is a great opportunity for me to start over and begin working even harder to become the player I believe I can be."

With Buffalo, there's certainly a lot more room for him to find out what kind of an NHL player he can be. Thursday night was proof of that, with the amount of time he saw. His goal chased Washington goalie Vitek Vanecek, which had to add to his confidence during the offensive onslaught.

It seems like Don Granato is giving him room to expand that confidence, too.

"He's very encouraging with his teaching," Bjork said. "Guys really respond well to it. The guys kind of told me when I came here, 'we're a lot different of a team right now, we're transitioning quick, playing hard, making a lot of plays.' Huge credit to him, I think he's taught these guys well."

It's certainly a different experience than being with a team that went to a Stanley Cup during his time, but it's also different in the sense he can develop without restrictions. In Buffalo they're not going to move him from

fourth line minutes one night to first the next, and he's not going to be changing wings if he has a couple of off nights, and he's certainly not going to sit out five games in a row.

"He plays a very high speed, high-tempo game," Granato said the day after the trade. "He has a lot of skill. And as far as expectations for him, we need to get him to settle into what we're doing, and that's going to take a little bit of time. On the coaching side, as always, we're looking to speed that process."

Bjork became the latest young Bruins forward who didn't fit in their plans. Perhaps he'll be the next one to carve out an NHL career with a different team.

"I've had injuries, which has kept me out of the lineup, and struggled to get back in at times. [I] haven't really established myself, I think," Bjork said the day after he was traded. "I've played a handful of games, but I haven't become the player, — I don't think I have my identity set yet. That's something that excites me, I'm looking forward to establishing that and building my game."

## **Ullmark week-to-week with lower-body injury**

By Jourdon LaBarber

Sabres.com

April 16, 2021

Linus Ullmark is considered week-to-week after sustaining a lower-body injury on Tuesday, Sabres interim head coach Don Granato announced Friday.

Ullmark previously missed 15 games with a lower-body injury in February and March. The Sabres have 13 games remaining this season, which concludes May 8.

"Right now, it's week-to-week and we don't have many weeks left," Granato said. "So, that one's a little touchy."

Ullmark is 9-6-3 with a .917 save percentage in 20 games this season. He is scheduled to become an unrestricted free agent this summer, though general manager Kevyn Adams said Monday that the team hopes to keep him in the fold moving forward.

Dustin Tokarski made his fifth start of the season on Thursday in Ullmark's absence, stopping 27 shots against Washington to earn his first NHL victory since 2015. Michael Houser, who has not played in the NHL, served as Tokarski's backup.

Granato said the team is looking to integrate goaltending prospect Ukko-Pekka Luukkonen into the NHL roster but is still determining a timeline for his potential recall. Luukkonen has been dealing with a minor lower-body injury that forced him to miss Rochester's game on Wednesday.

Luukkonen, a second-round pick in 2017, is 7-5-3 in 14 games with Rochester this season.

"Today's an important day to determine when he'll be integrated with us," Granato said.

The Sabres are also without Carter Hutton, who has been out since March 24 with a lower-body injury. Granato said Hutton has resumed skating on his own but there is no timetable for his return.

Granato also provided injury updates on forwards Kyle Okposo and Riley Sheahan, both of whom missed practice on Friday. Sheahan is considered day-to-day after sustaining an upper-body injury against Boston on Tuesday. Okposo is still being evaluated by doctors after he was hit in the head with a shot on Thursday.

### Lines at Friday's practice

53 Jeff Skinner - 23 Sam Reinhart - 68 Victor Olofsson

96 Anders Bjork - 24 Dylan Cozens - 25 Arttu Ruotsalainen

74 Rasmus Asplund - 37 Casey Mittelstadt - 72 Tage Thompson

13 Tobias Rieder - 20 Cody Eakin - 38 Jean-Sebastien Dea / 49 C.J. Smith

26 Rasmus Dahlin - 10 Henri Jokiharju

78 Jacob Bryson - 55 Rasmus Ristolainen

44 Matt Irwin / 88 Brandon Davidson - 33 Colin Miller

### Up next

The Sabres host the Penguins for the first of back-to-back games at KeyBank Center on Saturday afternoon. The two teams will co-host a joint "Pride Game" in celebration of the LGBTQ+ community.

The game will be broadcast nationally on NBC.

"I think it's awesome," Granato said. ... "It makes it a bigger deal and it makes it a lot of fun that the other team, as we know, they're engaged in that initiative and inclusion in our game. I'm looking forward to it."

The game begins at 3 p.m.