



Buffalo Sabres

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'Confident' again, Sabres' Rasmus Dahlin thriving under interim coach Don Granato

By Lance Lysowski
The Buffalo News
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Rasmus Dahlin rendered Nick Merkley helpless.

Dahlin, the Buffalo Sabres' 20-year-old defenseman, sent Merkley into a desperate chase for the puck by skating around the New Jersey Devils forward and toward the opposing net Tuesday night.

Dahlin cut across the slot from the left circle, dragging the puck on the blade of his stick before unleashing a wrist shot that whizzed past Devils goalie Scott Wedgewood to tie the score in the second period of a 5-3 win in Newark, N.J.

The sequence was similar to many shown on highlight reels leading up to Dahlin's selection first overall at the NHL draft in 2018 and illustrated how his offensive wizardry has been unleashed now that he's no longer tethered to the ultra-conservative 5-on-5 system deployed by former coach Ralph Krueger.

Dahlin has the "green light" from interim coach Don Granato to take such risks, whereas Krueger typically had his defensemen stationary at the blue line in the offensive zone.

"It makes me confident," Dahlin said following an optional practice Tuesday in KeyBank Center. "It makes me enjoy the game a lot. I can't complain."

Dahlin rarely showed joy under Krueger this season. Dahlin wasn't carrying the puck with confidence. His lack of engagement offensively carried over into his own zone, where there were continued lapses in coverage around the Sabres' net. He seemed to be second-guessing himself and his abilities.

Not anymore. When a rolling puck reached Dahlin's stick during a third-period power play Tuesday, he fought to maintain possession near the blue line, stickhandled around the Devils' Pavel Zacha and set up Casey Mittelstadt with a tape-to-tape pass for an easy tap-in, game-winning goal.

"That play is exactly why we need him playing with confidence," explained Granato. "When you're not confident, you second guess the bounce of that puck, you hesitate and then it's the breakaway the other way. When you're in the zone, you react on instincts and his instincts are incredible. ... That is a key play, key moment that could swing either way."

"Obviously, it was bouncing and Ras just did what Ras does, I guess. ... He makes it look so easy," added Mittelstadt. "But I don't think people at home know how hard of a play that is and then to get your head up and find me in front."

It was Dahlin's first multipoint game of the season, and his 99 career points are the most by any European defenseman in the NHL before their 21st birthday. In 10 games since Granato took over, Dahlin has two goals and two assists with 18 shots on goal while averaging 19:29 of ice time.

More telling, the Sabres are controlling play when Dahlin is on the ice. According to NaturalStatTrick.com, Dahlin's 51.78 on-ice shot-quality share at 5-on-5 ranks sixth on the team during that span, while his on-ice shot quality is third behind Sam Reinhart and Rasmus Ristolainen. Comparatively, Dahlin's shot-quality share with Krueger as coach was 12th among all qualifying players on the roster.

Dahlin also has been on the ice for the third-most high-danger scoring chances at 5-on-5 since Granato took over.

One notable difference is usage. In 28 games under Krueger this season, Dahlin ranked third among all Sabres in 5-on-5 defensive-zone starts, meaning he was asked to help shut down an opponent in Buffalo's own end. With Granato running the bench, Dahlin ranks 15th on the team in defensive-zone starts, second fewest among defensemen behind his partner, Henri Jokiharju.

"I can't say anything bad about Donnie," Dahlin said of Granato. "I love him as a coach. He's a great one. He's such a smart (coach). He knows hockey very well. I mean, we do all the things he says, and it works. He makes all the players very confident. Yeah, he's doing something special. I can't really point to what it is."

Defensive-zone coverage remains Dahlin's glaring weakness. His on-ice 5-on-5 shot quality against is the fourth-highest total among all Sabres with Granato as coach. Though plus-minus is a flawed statistic, Dahlin's league-worst minus-34 rating shows how poorly Buffalo has fared in 5-on-5 situations.

Dahlin has been the latest in a long line of Sabres impacted by coaching turnover. He had a historic rookie season while playing in the run-and-gun system deployed by Phil Housley, needed the first half of last season to adjust to Krueger's preferred style of play and, fortunately for the Sabres, is again playing in a system that suits his talents.

While it's easy to focus on the difficult moments in Dahlin's development, his mastery with the puck should remind fans why he has been considered a future generational talent. Another example occurred Saturday night with his no-look breakout pass to spark a 2-on-1 that ended with Mittelstadt scoring the tying goal against the New York Rangers.

"We don't win that game without him rising to the level he can rise to," Granato said Tuesday. "He made a couple of big plays to tip that game back our way and that's what you hope for out of guys with his talent. Special player, fun to watch and very engaged right now."

Dahlin noted that recent team success has led to better individual execution. The Sabres (9-23-6) will carry a five-game point streak into Thursday night's matchup against the Devils in KeyBank Center.

"We're playing with the puck," said Dahlin. "We want to create stuff. I think a lot has to do with the confidence. We've won some games now. You're feeling better. Going into games, you have a feeling you're going to win the game. It makes a huge difference."

With the April 12 trade deadline approaching, General Manager Kevyn Adams is assessing which players will be part of the Sabres' future. Sportsnet's Elliotte Friedman reported Adams is listening to inquiries about several players. It's safe to assume Adams has no interest in moving Dahlin, who is averaging a career-high 20:38 of ice time in 38 games this season.

Dahlin is often among the last Sabres on the ice at morning skates and practices, working with the coaching staff on his shot and other nuances of his game. He continues to ignite this team's offense at 5-on-5 and the man advantage.

Since making his debut at the start of the 2018-19 season, Dahlin is tied for ninth among all NHL defensemen in power-play points. His resolve on the man advantage showed again Tuesday with the pass to Mittelstadt.

Yet, for all that Dahlin has accomplished in recent weeks, this has been another difficult season in Buffalo. He landed on the Covid protocol list in February as a close contact and his talent was suppressed in Krueger's system. Granato, though, seems to have unlocked what makes Dahlin great.

"Well, it's not been fun," Dahlin said of his season. "It's been very tough. You just have to dig through it. ... You see the character in the players and what we have done. It's kind of cool to be a part of."

No timeline for Sabres to receive Covid-19 vaccinations, says interim coach Don Granato

By Lance Lysowski
The Buffalo News
April 7, 2021

Medical personnel from the Buffalo Sabres are investigating how soon players, coaches and staff can receive Covid-19 vaccinations.

With availability greater and restrictions eased in New York State, the National Hockey League's Rangers and Major League Baseball's Mets revealed their organizations will receive vaccinations this week as professional sports continue during the pandemic.

The Sabres endured a Covid-19 outbreak in February that paused and eventually derailed their season. Nine players were placed on the league's protocol list, some of whom tested positive. Defenseman Rasmus Ristolainen was bedridden while experiencing debilitating symptoms, including chest pain, and former coach Ralph Krueger, 61, was also symptomatic after testing positive.

The Sabres, still last in the NHL with a 9-23-6 record, have 18 games remaining, beginning Thursday night in KeyBank Center against the New Jersey Devils.

"I know that the medical team here, the trainers have been looking at that," Granato said following an optional practice Wednesday when asked about vaccinations. "I don't have any news today on it, but they've been looking at that for a while, when this will potentially become available for our guys. So, I'm sure they're hard at work on it. I know, like I've said, they've been hopeful for that day to come sooner than later."

More teams across professional sports in North America are receiving vaccinations. MLB and NBA and their respective players' associations have issued joint memos to players encouraging acceptance of vaccines and offering a reprieve from certain protocols if doses are complete. MLB told its players that full-vaccinated individuals can gather inside hotel rooms and other indoor spaces without masks.

The Mets even held a mandatory education session for players and staff members Tuesday in Philadelphia, an attempt to ease concerns from anyone hesitant to receive shots.

The Sabres' last encounter with a possible Covid-19 situation occurred last month in Pittsburgh, when Granato and interim assistant coach Matt Ellis entered the protocols after producing what was later determined to be false positives. Granato, who was hospitalized in October 2019 while battling pneumonia and a blood infection, later told the media that he had already received both doses of the vaccination.

In addition to the Sabres' Covid outbreak in February, their top minor-league affiliate, the Rochester Americans, also had their season paused after three players tested positive for the virus last month. The NHL, though, continues to battle the spread of the virus.

The Vancouver Canucks' season remains on pause, as the team announced Wednesday that 25 members of the organization have tested positive for Covid-19. The source of the infection was confirmed as a variant.

Prominent role

With Taylor Hall likely on his way out of Buffalo, the Sabres will continue to use forward Rasmus Asplund on a top-six line alongside Tage Thompson and Casey Mittelstadt.

Asplund, 23, has four goals in 10 games this season, including the Sabres' first in the 5-3 win over the Devils on Tuesday night. The former second-round draft pick has three goals in his last five games, one of which he played only two minutes because of an upper-body injury. It's a significant improvement after Asplund scored only one goal in 21 games with Buffalo last season.

"I felt last year that I started off my first five games really good, but then I got really tired mentally," Asplund said. "That's a thing I've really been trying to work on and really be able to reset after every game and be ready

mentally to be 100 percent every night. It's a tough league to play in and this year it's been even tougher. So, I've been trying to get my mental game to where it has to be to stick around in the NHL."

Not-so-special teams

Mittlestadt's goal in the third period Tuesday night broke another slump for the Sabres' struggling power play, which is 2-for-38 over the past 21 games. Both units have routinely failed to enter the zone with ease and the top group hasn't developed a second shooting threat to complement Victor Olofsson.

The power play was one of Granato's primary duties as an assistant coach under Krueger, but the Sabres have turned their focus to fixing the 5-on-5 game. With few full team practices amid the truncated schedule, Granato has not had enough time to address the woes on the man advantage.

"You guys know there's analytics for everything, there's hundreds of thousands of different things you could be working on and pick apart to work on," said Granato. "But unfortunately, as a coach and as a team, you have to make a priority list and hit a few of those with the way the schedule is. So, the power play probably fell victim to us needing to focus on the 5-on-5 game and the penalty kill probably benefited from that focus on a 5-on-5 game. That's just the way it is."

Lineup notes

Winger Kyle Okposo was among the Sabres to participate in an optional practice Wednesday, an encouraging sign after the 32-year-old had sat out recent on-ice sessions while recovering from a minor injury that has not prevented him from playing.

Linus Ullmark also skated, which might indicate that Dustin Tokarski will start in goal Thursday night against the Devils. If so, Ullmark can then return to the lineup Friday when the Washington Capitals are in Buffalo for puck drop at 7 p.m.

Asplund relishing new opportunity on line with Thompson and Mittelstadt

By Brayton J. Wilson

WGR 550

April 7, 2021

Buffalo Sabres forward Rasmus Asplund has taken advantage of the opportunity he's been recently given in the lineup.

The 23-year-old came back from an upper-body injury last Thursday against the New York Rangers and has now found himself playing on Buffalo's top line just three games back with Casey Mittelstadt and Tage Thompson.

In his three games played, Asplund has managed to score a pair of goals, while using his speed and physical presence to push his tempo of play to the next level. That was on full display on Tuesday night in New Jersey when he shined on a line with Mittelstadt and Thompson, playing 14:07 of total ice-time, and scoring Buffalo's first goal of the game in the first period.

So far through 10 games this season, Asplund has four goals, which puts him in a tie for sixth on the team's goal scoring list.

This 2020-21 season has been a trying one for many players, but Asplund has been shuffled up and down the roster quite often. He started the season as part of the taxi squad in Buffalo before getting some playing time in Rochester with the Americans, and then being back up with the Sabres and going in-and-out of the lineup.

Despite all that, Asplund is trying to just enjoy his time this season in the NHL and take in as much as he can with the Sabres.

"I'm trying to enjoy every game and every shift I get here," Asplund said following Wednesday's practice at KeyBank Center. "We're playing in the best league in the world. It's something you've been working on your whole life and really tried to reach. I'm trying to have fun. That's the key thing for me."

The road to the NHL for Asplund has been a long one since being drafted in the second round (33rd overall) in the 2016 NHL Draft. He stayed in Sweden to play in the Swedish Hockey League through the 2017-18 season before making the jump to North America. After a successful rookie campaign in the American Hockey League with 41 points (10+31) in 75 games, Asplund finally got his shot in the NHL just last season, appearing in 29 games with a goal and two assists for three points.

Heading into this season, Asplund started his play back home in Sweden in the country's Tier-II professional league, HockeyAllsvenskan. He produced well in his time with Västerås IK, scoring four goals and adding five assists for nine points in 14 games. That allowed him to stay in playing shape until the time came for him to return to Buffalo to prepare for training camp starting in early January.

While Asplund stayed active as the Sabres patiently awaited to play again following the COVID-19 break and the NHL's Return to Play plan, he also spent time working on his mental game to better prepare himself for his third season in North America.

"I thought last year I started my first few games really good, but then I got really tight mentally. That's the thing I've really been trying to work on and really be able to reset after every game and get ready mentally to be at my 100% every night," Asplund explained. "It's a tough league to play in, and with this year it's even tougher. I'm trying to get my mental game to where it has to be to stick around in the NHL."

Going back to Tuesday's game, the line of Asplund-Mittelstadt-Thompson was clearly Buffalo's best line, generating six of Buffalo's 13 scoring chances, and also a good amount of offensive zone time. On Asplund's goal in the first, the young Swede forced a turnover at the New Jersey blue line, which he quickly turned into a 2-on-1 rush with Mittelstadt before he buried the puck on a beautiful one-time feed.

Sabres interim coach Don Granato was very pleased with his line's production on the night, and praised the trio for playing with plenty of confidence, which he has urged his team to do more of since taking over head coaching duties on March 17.

Granato sees that confidence growing in Asplund's game, and knows that he put in a lot of hard work to get to where he is heading into the home stretch of the season.

"I've watched him, watched him last year, and he's made himself a better hockey player," Granato said. "He played a handful of games for us last year, it was almost an apprenticeship. He internalized it, he kind of figured out what his strengths and weaknesses were, he did a great job in the offseason and came back this year better as a player and better in the form of physical. And then just targeting - just another of leadership and determination within him, and that's what you see now. He was finding and searching his way around the NHL a year ago, and now he's targeting what to do and what he can do within a shift or a game, and that's where you see the results now. He's very result oriented. He knows what's wanted from the coach, the system he plays, and within the game itself. He's ready for that next opportunity, and being ready to seize it is the biggest difference as he's built himself up."

Asplund did not start Tuesday night's game playing with Mittelstadt and Thompson, but their immediate chemistry on the ice led to Granato turning to that combination more times than not. He says that having some past experience playing together in Rochester helped the three pay early dividends in Tuesday's win.

"We've been playing together in [Rochester], so I think we know each other pretty well," Asplund said. "I know what type of hockey we want to play together. They're such good guys, it's easy to talk to them and try to work out certain things that we need to work on. It was a lot of fun last night to play with them, and hopefully we can keep building on what we did yesterday."

Asplund was part of an optional skate for the Sabres on Wednesday, with a number of players also electing to take part in on-ice activities. Some of the other players included Thompson, Rasmus Dahlin, Jeff Skinner, Kyle Okposo, Henri Jokiharju, Victor Olofsson, Jacob Bryson, Arttu Ruotsalainen and all three goaltenders - Linus Ullmark, Dustin Tokarski and Michael Houser.

Quote of the Day:

"When you lose that many games in a row, there has to be a point where everyone's saying, 'F--- it. We've got to start playing better and start winning games.' Lately it's been better, and there's still a lot of games left and still a lot of room for improvement." - Rasmus Ristolainen

OPINION: Future for Linus Ullmark looks cloudy

By Joe DiBiase

WGR 550

April 7, 2021

Here comes the NHL Trade Deadline, less than one week away.

The Buffalo Sabres are, of course, sellers going into April 12 and are fully expected to move pending unrestricted free agents Taylor Hall and Brandon Montour.

However, one soon-to-be free agent is getting very little trade talk in the media - Linus Ullmark.

Ullmark is on an expiring contract and can hit the open market after the season, if he so chooses.

TSN hockey insider Darren Dreger reported this week that the Sabres have fielded calls on Ullmark's availability, including a call from the Toronto Maple Leafs. However, general manager Kevyn Adams views him as a "foundational player."

There are several ways the next few months can go for Ullmark and the Sabres.

Trade

In what now seems to be an unlikely scenario, due to how Adams views Ullmark, the Sabres could trade their starting goaltender at the deadline, as to not risk losing him for nothing in free agency.

Given there are several contending teams in the NHL that need to add in net like the Leafs, Avalanche, Capitals, etc., there would be a competitive market for Ullmark's services.

In fact, should the Sabres decide to move Ullmark, he'd be one of the hottest names available.

I can give you all types of metrics that show how great of a season Ullmark is having, but I'm not sure I have to go further than the fact that he has a winning record (8-5-3) on one of the worst Sabres teams we've ever laid eyes on.

If you want other stats too, here's how highly Ullmark ranks this year in the NHL at 5-on-5, among goalies who have played at least 300 minutes:

- Save percentage: 7th (.938)
- High-danger save percentage: 5th (.875)
- Goals saved above average*: 6th (7.97)

* - Goals saved above average is the amount of goals a goalie has saved compared to the league average save percentage with the same amount of shots-against.

Looking at TSN's Trade Bait list for the deadline, you really don't find goalies available with production as good as Ullmark's.

Goalies on the list include Jonathan Bernier, Chris Driedger, Devan Dubynk, and Darcy Kuemper.

Driedger is the only one having a better season than Ullmark, but he has just 28 career NHL starts under his belt. Ullmark would be a much more trustworthy option for a contending team.

Re-sign

The ideal scenario for the Sabres and Adams would be Ullmark returning to Buffalo on a contract extension. There's just nothing in net behind him that could play in the NHL next season.

Ukko-Pekka Luukkonen was a highly-touted prospect, but his development has stalled since undergoing double hip surgery in 2019. In 11 games for the Rochester Americans this season, Luukkonen has an .893 save percentage.

There is, of course, still hope for Luukkonen becoming the Sabres' franchise goaltender, but he doesn't appear to be anywhere near ready to make the leap to the NHL in the 2021-22 season.

Meanwhile, Carter Hutton is a free agent, thank goodness.

Dustin Tokarski is the only Sabres goalie under contract, but he is nothing more than an AHL goaltender at this point in his career.

It's Ullmark, or start over.

With the Sabres having no other goalies, Ullmark having a career year, and Adams viewing him as a "foundational player," his next contract is in line to be pricey.

When I first started thinking about what an Ullmark contract would look like, it was something in the ballpark of three years at \$3 million per-year.

Now, I'm beginning to think that's naive of me.

At the bare minimum, Ullmark is going to cost the Sabres \$4 million per-year. Comparable players like Elvis Merzlikins of the Columbus Blue Jackets and Antti Raanta and Darcy Kuemper of the Arizona Coyotes all make north of \$4 million.

Ullmark could also run up the Sabres' price if they have to pay a Sabres-premium.

The team is in such a dark place that I'm not ready to assume anyone would sign or re-sign for less than an overpayment.

To add to that, this is a weak free agent class for goalies coming up. Avalanche netminder Philipp Grubauer is having his best season as a pro and if he doesn't re-sign in Colorado, he will be the top name on the market.

I'd peg Ullmark right after, if not in front of Grubauer.

Veterans Frederik Andersen, Pekka Rinne, and Jaroslav Halak are all intriguing, but I'd bet Ullmark gets more money than any of them, in part because of his age.

If Ullmark loves it in Buffalo and wants an assured workload, he might sign here for market value.

If Ullmark is sick of losing and wants to play for a contender, it'll cost the Sabres more than what he's worth to keep him around.

That's the worst case scenario. If Ullmark just wants to go to a team with a winning culture, the Sabres will either overpay him to stay, or lose a guy they could've had valuable pieces for at the deadline for nothing.

If that situation comes about, Adams will have a tough decision to make. Overpay Ullmark, or start over in net.

Rasmus Asplund promoted to Sabres' first line, close to earning regular duty

By Bill Hoppe

Olean Times Herald

April 7, 2021

BUFFALO – Sabres winger Rasmus Asplund said his first taste of the NHL last season exhausted him mentally. The Swede couldn't let go of what transpired during games. He even had trouble falling asleep.

"I felt last year that I started off my first five games really good but then I got really tired mentally," Asplund said on a Zoom call following Wednesday's optional practice.

So in the offseason, Asplund, 23, began developing what he called his "mental game." Now after he plays, for example, he tries to slow down his mind by laying down and doing mental exercises for 30 minutes to "reset."

"Just take my time, just stop and just relax for a little bit and let the mind rest and just go through what I've been doing good and great," he said. "It started with the workouts this summer."

Asplund said he can "just put that day in the past."

"I'm looking forward to the next day, which I felt last year I didn't do," said Asplund, a second-round-pick in 2016, 33rd overall. "I was still (thinking about) yesterday and thinking about the game yesterday. Just my mind never really got a rest. So when you get to play like 25, 30 games like I did last year, your mental game is not there. You feel tired, you're not sleeping well."

His work has started paying dividends. Asplund, who played only seven of the Sabres' first 36 games, has quickly earned interim coach Don Granato's trust.

Granato promoted Asplund beside top center Casey Mittelstadt and Tage Thompson early in Tuesday's 5-3 road win over the New Jersey Devils.

"It was instant chemistry," Granato said after the Sabres prepared for Thursday's game against New Jersey at KeyBank Center.

Asplund converted Mittelstadt's nifty pass 9:56 into Tuesday's game, his fourth goal in only 10 games. That goal total is double what winger Taylor Hall, who had been playing on that line, produced in 37 games. The Sabres held Hall out of Tuesday's contest as a precaution as they try to trade him.

Not surprisingly, Granato said he plans to keep the line intact Thursday.

"There's no need to reinvent the wheel," he said. "If those guys have chemistry and it's going and they feel good, there's no reason to change that."

The line generated Corsi For on Tuesday – the percentage of shot attempts by the team while a trio is on the ice five-on-five – of 60% during 9 minutes, 51 seconds of ice time, according to NaturalStatTrick.com.

"We're all really good friends," Mittelstadt said of his linemates. "It's nice to go out there and have some familiar faces. I think what we did well (Tuesday) is we're trying to make plays and if they don't work, just make sure we got a guy back. If I mess up, Aspy and Tommer are backchecking hard. If one of them do, I'm going back hard."

Asplund said: "We know each other pretty well, know what type of hockey we want to play together."

Granato said Asplund used his 29-game run with the Sabres last season as "almost an apprenticeship." He believes Asplund figured out his strengths and weaknesses and arrived this season ready to grab his opportunities.

Of course, the 5-foot-11, 189-pound Asplund had to wait to play regularly. He has spent most of the season on the taxi squad. He also played three games with the Rochester Americans.

After the Sabres suffered a few injuries up front and traded center Eric Staal, a spot finally materialized in late March.

"He was finding and searching his way around the NHL a year ago and now he's targeting what to do and what he can do within a shift and a game," Granato said. "And that's where you see the results now. He's very results-oriented. He knows what's wanted from the coach, from the system he plays and obviously within the game itself.

"He's ready for that next opportunity. Being ready to seize it is really the biggest difference as he's built himself up."

Sabres notes: Power play in rut; Don Granato ‘doing something special’

By Bill Hoppe

Olean Times Herald

April 7, 2021

BUFFALO – In the early days of the season, the Sabres’ potent power play carried them, accounting for a whopping 50% of their goals over the first 17 games.

But since that scorching start – the Sabres scored 19 times and converted an NHL-best 36.4% of their chances – they’ve been downright awful, mustering just two power-play goals in 38 tries in the last 21 outings.

That’s just 5.3%, the league’s worst number over that stretch.

While the power play provided the game-winning goal in Tuesday’s 5-3 victory over the New Jersey Devils – center Casey Mittelstadt redirected defenseman Rasmus Dahlin’s pass – interim coach Don Granato still wasn’t pleased with the units.

“We scored a very big goal last night on the power play,” Granato said on a Zoom call following Wednesday’s optional practice. “We just haven’t been consistent on the power play. We’ve hit a couple goal posts on the power play ... but it was still spotty.

“It felt like it was not as in control of it as it should’ve been when you have a power play, and that’s what we’ve lost. It’s a little more random. We are getting chances, but the possession isn’t as consistent as we’d like.”

The absence of captain Jack Eichel, the power-play quarterback, has certainly hurt the Sabres. An upper-body injury has sidelined the center the last 15 games. Opponents have also keyed on winger Victor Olofsson, who hasn’t unleashed his wicked shot from the circle as frequently.

Dahlin, who kept the puck in the zone late in Tuesday’s game before adroitly feeding Mittelstadt, said the power play is at its best when “we’re not thinking.”

“We just go and play (with) our instincts,” he said. “We move the puck quick. We shoot a lot and retrieve the puck quick. You see all the players we have. They’re such a skilled players. We don’t think, we just play. Shoot and try to create scoring chances.”

Granato said the Sabres’ need to focus on other areas during their limited practice time has hurt the power play.

“Unfortunately as a coach and as a team, you have to make a priority list and hit a few of those with the way the schedule is,” he said. “So the power play probably fell victim to us needing to focus on the five-on-five game and the penalty kill probably benefited from that focus on a five-on-five game. That’s just the way it is.”

The Sabres host New Jersey on Thursday at KeyBank Center.

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Dahlin said having the green light from Granato to move the puck and utilize his slick skills makes him “confident.”

“It makes me enjoy the game a lot,” he said. “I can’t complain.”

Dahlin said he enjoys playing for Granato, who replaced Ralph Krueger on March 17.

“I can’t say anything bad about Donnie,” he said. “I love him as a coach. He’s a great one. He’s such a smart (person). He knows hockey very well. I mean, we do all the things he says, and it works. He makes all the players very confident. Yeah, he’s doing something special. I can’t really point to what it is.”

The Sabres have won two straight games and have points in five straight after an 18-game winless streak.

"When you lose that many games in a row, there has to be a point where everyone is saying like, '(Screw) it. We've got to start playing better and start winning games,'" Sabres defenseman Rasmus Ristolainen said. "Lately, it's been better and there's still a lot of games left and still a lot of room for improvement."

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Granato said he has kept tabs over the years on Sabres prospect Linus Weissbach, who signed a two-year, entry-level contract Tuesday.

Weissbach, a winger the Sabres drafted in the seventh round in 2017, 192nd overall, just finished his senior season at Wisconsin.

The Swede was a Wisconsin recruit when Granato was an associate coach under his brother, Tony, with the Badgers in 2016-17.

"Good kid, excited that he signed with us and he was a fun prospect back then," Granato said.

Weissbach, 22, scored 12 goals and 41 points as a senior in 31 games as senior in 2020-21.

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The Sabres on Wednesday sent defenseman Brandon Davidson and forward C.J. Smith from the taxi squad to the Rochester Americans. They played in the Amerks' home game hours later against the Syracuse Crunch.

Dahlin's confidence growing under Granato

By Paul Stockman

WIVB

April 7, 2021

BUFFALO, N.Y. (WIVB) – Rasmus Dahlin has certainly been playing better in his last few times on the ice. He's picked up three points in his last two games, and that includes a goal and an assist in the team's win over New Jersey Tuesday night. To put that in perspective, Dahlin had only four points in the entire month of March over a stretch of 16 games.

One could chalk that up to just a bad stretch, since the team itself struggled that entire month, but Dahlin's improvement in recent games appears to be evident, and it could be in part because of Interim Head Coach Don Granato. Dahlin seems to be getting more offensive chances in Granato's system.

"It makes me confident, it makes me enjoy the game a lot so I can't complain," Dahlin said.

Granato said that he's given the young defenseman the "green light" in the offensive zone which certainly appears to be given Dahlin much more of a boost on the ice.

"He's been great," Granato said. "[Tuesday night] was evident of it. We don't win that game without him rising to the level he can rise to and he made a couple of big plays to tip that game back our way and that's what you hope for of guys with his talent. Special player, fun to watch and very engaged right now."

For now it appears Granato has earned a lot of respect from Dahlin, as his style of play seems to mesh well with the Sabres defenseman. This whole team appears to be more confident as the wins keep piling up.

"He knows hockey very well," Dahlin said. "We do all the things he says and it works. He makes all the players very confident and he's doing something special I can't point to what it is."

Buffalo's won three out of their last four and have gotten a point in five straight games. They next play New Jersey on Thursday at home at 7 p.m.

Hamilton Take2: Sabres should think long, hard about trading Linus Ullmark as deadline approaches

By Paul Hamilton

WGRZ

April 7, 2021

BUFFALO, N.Y. — With the NHL trade deadline approaching fast, what should the Sabres do with Linus Ullmark?

To start the season he was nothing more than a backup goalie, but I felt there was still time for him to be a No. 1, and he has taken the job.

In a season where the Sabres were winless in 18 games, Ullmark is 8-5-3. His save percentage is a decent .919, which is a career high for him. Ullmark is 4-1-1 lately with a 2.19 goals against and .937 save percentage.

This is the stretch of games where he really showed he's up for the job.

The Sabres' plan all along was to bide their time until Ukko-Pekka Luukkonen was ready for the NHL. Luukkonen is 22 years old and playing in his second professional season, while Ullmark is 27 playing in his sixth pro year.

The problem with the Sabres' plan is Luukkonen is not ready for the NHL, and Ullmark will be an unrestricted free agent after the season.

This year Ullmark got a one-year contract which paid him \$2.6 million. The Vancouver Canucks just handed 25-year-old Thatcher Demko a five-year, \$25 million deal, and my guess is Ullmark's agent will be looking for more because his client is the better goalie.

I've never been a fan of paying goaltenders huge amounts. In his day, Carey Price was a great goalie, but there's just no way I pay a goaltender \$10.5 million.

Sergei Bobrovsky is very good until it matters the most, and the Florida Panthers handed him \$10 million per season.

Only 12 goalies in the NHL make more than \$5 million per year. Kevyn Adams has to decide if Ullmark is one of the top 13 goalies in the NHL. That would make him slightly above average.

When I look at the 12 making more, I would say Ullmark is as good or better than Martin Jones, Jonathan Quick and Cory Schneider. Some would add Jacob Markstrom to that list.

Luukkonen is a bit of a concern to me, but I certainly haven't given up thinking he won't make it. Buffalo also has a very good prospect at Michigan in Erik Portillo. The 20-year-old Swedish goalie was 4-1-0 in his freshman season with the Wolverines with a 1.67 goals against and .935 save percentage. Portillo was taken in the third round of the 2019 draft.

Portillo was stuck behind junior goalie Strauss Mann. The 22-year-old was never drafted in the NHL.

The Sabres definitely need a goalie, and it would seem foolish to groom Ullmark for six seasons just to let him go.

Don't forget, they would've lost him to Vegas had they not traded a sixth-round pick to the Golden Knights to take Will Carrier. I think they need to keep Ullmark if they can keep the price under \$6 million per season but ... Ullmark holds the cards because he can just walk after the season if he wants out.

Sabres open to administering COVID-19 vaccine to team

By Ashley Holder

WGRZ

April 7, 2021

BUFFALO, N.Y. — In the State of New York, anyone who is 16 years old is now eligible to get the COVID-19 vaccine, and professional athletes are now taking advantage of this recent change.

One of the first teams in New York to do is the Rangers. According to the New York Post on Monday, the team canceled practice for staff and players to get vaccinated.

In a statement from the Rangers, they said "many" of their players and staff members have decided to get their first dose.

As the NHL continues to deal with COVID struggles, and the Sabres made it out their COVID debacle not once but twice, interim head coach Don Granato could be hinting that buffalo could be next to follow in line.

"I know that the medical team here the trainers have been looking at that," Granato said. "I don't have any news today on it, but they been looking at that for a while, when this will potentially became available for our guys, so I'm sure (they are working on it). Like I said, they have been hopeful for that day to come sooner than later."

Obviously the Sabres don't want to end up back in a COVID-19 situation once again, but there hasn't been any official statement from the organization stating if players and staff will get vaccinated.

Top Five Trade Destinations for Taylor Hall

By Matt Larkin

The Hockey News

April 7, 2021

Nobody expected it to play out quite like this, right?

Sure, when Taylor Hall signed a surprising one-year, \$8-million contract last off-season to play for the Buffalo Sabres, who had missed nine straight post-seasons, the range of outcomes for his 2020-21 season was wide. Maybe Hall would return to his 2017-18 Hart Trophy form, making magic with Jack Eichel and helping Buffalo end its drought while he hammered out a long-term extension. Or maybe the Sabres would stay bad and Hall would become a coveted rental commodity, shipped out for a package of prospects and a first-round pick, as he was last season when the New Jersey Devils sent him to Arizona.

Instead, we have...the Sabres being far worse than any of us imagined, enduring the longest winless streak of the salary-cap era and about to tie the NHL record with a 10th consecutive playoff miss. Meanwhile, Hall has labored through a terrible season, managing just two goals in 37 games. He hasn't been as bad as his surface numbers look (an interesting thread here from Rachel Doerrie sheds light), as he's been unbelievably unlucky, scoring on just 2.3 percent of his shots. But there's no denying this is Hall's worst season. He's generating the fewest shots and scoring chances of his career per 60 minutes at 5-on-5 and his second-fewest primary assists per 60.

Hall is thus an extremely difficult player to appraise approaching the April-12 trade deadline. Still just 29, he possesses the game-breaking raw talent to put a contending team over the top. But it's still tough to imagine a team paying full value for someone with two goals. Also complicating matters: Hall's \$8-million AAV. During this flat-cap season, it's a large number for teams to inherit, and Buffalo may have to eat as much as half the cap hit for it to work. The cap hit can also be chopped up if a third-party team participates in a deal.

Still, few if any available forwards on the block at the moment have Hall's upside, so there will be competing bids for him, and that means it's still possible Sabres GM Kevyn Adams gets a return comparable to what New Jersey got last season.

Who are best fits for Hall's services? Consider these five teams, presented alphabetically. Some constitute a suggestion based on hockey fit, and some are already reported to be chasing Hall.

Carolina Hurricanes

The Hurricanes qualify as top-tier Stanley Cup contenders, owning the NHL's second-best points percentage at .724. Their calling card is team defense above all. They allow the fourth-fewest goals per game and sit top 10 in most defense-oriented metrics, from penalty killing to shot attempts and scoring chances allowed per 60 at 5-on-5. They've been merely good rather than great offensively, however, sitting 12th in goals per game despite boasting the league's No. 1 power play and ranking near the top of the league in scoring chances per 60 at 5-on-5. Might Hall give them the little push they need to become an elite team at both ends of the ice? They're close already. With Teuvo Teravainen's concussion problems still keeping him out of the lineup, the Canes could use a bona fide top-six forward as insurance. With James Reimer, Alex Nedeljkovic and Petr Mrazek creating a logjam in net, perhaps GM Don Waddell would consider dealing Reimer or Mrazek to make it more financially feasible to pursue an upgrade such as Hall.

Edmonton Oilers

The Oilers are arguably most dangerous when splitting centers Connor McDavid and Leon Draisaitl onto two separate lines rather than loading up with Draisaitl on McDavid's left wing. Acquiring Hall would allow coach Dave Tippett to pair each center with one of Hall and Ryan Nugent-Hopkins to create two deadly duos. The Oilers could become a true Stanley Cup threat if GM Ken Holland renders the roster a bit less top heavy. A report earlier this week suggested the Oilers "are in on" Hall already. Could an Edmonton homecoming be in the cards?

Florida Panthers

The Panthers check more boxes than any other team when it comes to a hospitable Hall environment. They rank among the top Stanley Cup contenders in the NHL at the moment. They need a true No. 2 left winger behind Jonathan Huberdeau rather than mixing and matching the likes of Mason Marchment, Anthony Duclair and Frank Vatrano. In matchup master Joel Quenneville, they have a legendary coach who could probably get the most out of Hall. Even though their biggest need is obviously on the right side of their blueline after Aaron Ekblad's heartbreaking leg injury, the Panthers can afford to acquire Hall plus a defense upgrade given the cap savings from placing Ekblad on LTIR. There may be no contender with more financial flexibility at the moment.

Montreal Canadiens

The Canadiens wouldn't have appeared on a list like this even two days ago. Brendan Gallagher's broken thumb changed that. Not only does his multi-week injury create a need for veteran scoring in Montreal's top six, but placing him on LTIR also could give GM Marc Bergevin a loophole in which he holds Gallagher out until the post-season begins and his cap hit no longer matters. Hall plays the opposite wing, but the Habs have enough forwards who can play either side that coach Dominique Ducharme could figure out a fit.

New York Islanders

Not only did Anders Lee's season-ending injury create a huge hole in the Isles' first-line left winger spot, but it also landed Lee on LTIR, giving GM Lou Lamoriello, the master cap manipulator, wiggle room to pursue another upgrade. Based on team need and financial viability, the Isles are as good a fit as any team. They badly need to replace Lee's scoring touch. They're an exemplary defensive club under coach Barry Trotz, averaging the fewest high-danger chances against at 5-on-5, but they barely crack the top half of the league in total offense, largely because they own one of the weaker power plays of any team currently in a playoff spot. Hall would make them more dynamic.

Asplund credits improvement to offseason mental training

By Jourdon LaBarber

Sabres.com

April 7, 2021

Rasmus Asplund appeared in 29 games for the Sabres after making his NHL debut last season. He realizes now that the grind took its toll mentally.

"I was still (thinking about) yesterday and thinking about the game yesterday," Asplund said. "Just my mind never really got a rest. When you get to play like 25, 30 games like I did last year, your mental game is not there. You feel tired, you're not sleeping well."

Asplund put mental training atop his list of priorities during the offseason. He is seeing the results of late, having carved out a role in the lineup after beginning the season shifting back and forth between Rochester and the taxi squad. He has four goals in just 10 games this season, three of which have come in his past five appearances.

Sabres interim head coach Don Granato referred to Asplund's taste of Buffalo last season as an "apprenticeship" of sorts. Granato saw Asplund return this season as a more refined player, aware of his strengths and weaknesses and willing to take command of his role at the NHL level.

"That's what you see now," Granato said. "He was finding and searching his way around the NHL a year ago and now he's targeting what to do and what he can do within a shift and a game. And that's where you see the results now. He's very result oriented."

"He knows what's wanted from the coach, from the system he plays, and obviously within the game itself and he's ready for that next opportunity. Being ready to seize it is really the biggest difference as he's built himself up."

The biggest factor, Asplund said, has been his ability to leave games in the past. He set aside a half an hour after each workout during the offseason to lay down and complete thought exercises that essentially allowed him to reset his mind.

He's carried the practice into his postgame routine during a season that has been as mentally demanding as any, with a compacted schedule compounded by off-ice restrictions.

"I watch my video, then I do those exercises until I kind of close the book and just put that day in the past," he said. "I'm looking forward to the next day, which I felt last year I didn't do."

Up next

The Sabres held an optional skate in preparation for back-to-back games against New Jersey and Washington on Thursday and Friday, respectively. Thursday's game will be the last of the season between the Sabres and Devils.

Coverage on MSG begins at 6:30 p.m. The puck drops at 7.

Sabres assign Davidson, Smith to Amerks

By Jourdon LaBarber

Sabres.com

April 7, 2021

The Buffalo Sabres have reassigned forward C.J. Smith and defenseman Brandon Davidson from the taxi squad to the Rochester Americans, the team announced Wednesday.

The Amerks host the Syracuse Crunch at 7:05 p.m.

Smith has seven points (2+5) in six games with Rochester this season. Davidson made his Amerks debut against Syracuse last Thursday and tallied three shots.

Buffalo hosts New Jersey on Thursday at 7 p.m. Coverage on MSG begins at 6:30.