



# **Buffalo Sabres**

## **Daily Press Clips**

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## **Sabres organist Curtis Cook plays empty arena, strikes chord with fans**

By Jason Wolf

The Buffalo News

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Curtis Cook wore his blue Buffalo Sabres jersey as he sat in Section 120 before the team's home finale Tuesday at KeyBank Center, where he placed his hands upon the keys of the Lowrey organ, its rich tones resonating throughout the empty arena.

"As an organist, you kind of feed off and judge the situation by how the crowd is reacting, depending on what's happening on the ice," Cook said. "So not having that reaction was weird. That's for sure. I was playing rallies and responding to them myself by using a drum sound instead of having people respond to me.

"But I think, ultimately, I'm sitting there at the organ and doing everything I normally do during a game, which is going, 'Yeah!' or 'Aww, c'mon,' as a fan myself. So I just sort of tapped into my own energy to try to bring the music to people at home."

Cook, 27, has played the organ at every Sabres home game this season, nearly all of them without fans in attendance, yet found a way to strike a chord with his audience. The Williamsville North High School and Niagara County Community College graduate has delighted crowds for more than a decade, since he began playing at Holy Cross Lutheran Church in Clarence, a gig that began with the self-taught 15-year-old taking hymn requests from the congregation.

Cook laughs about being thrown into the proverbial fire and how the experience launched his music career. He performs at three area churches, the Riviera Theatre in North Tonawanda, Shea's Performing Arts Center in Buffalo and for his favorite hockey team since 2017, when a colleague at a local car dealership passed the wunderkind's card along to the Sabres' front office. Cook served as part-time entertainment that season, then was hired to perform at every game and outfitted in blue and yellow suits.

"I always try to challenge myself to do something different and be different, because as a musician, you have to be unique," Cook said. "That's really how you make it in this business. ... You didn't see a lot of younger people playing the organ, and it spans all genres of music, really, from church music to theater organs, which is totally different."

In the summer of 2018, at Cook's request, the Sabres replaced their Nord Stage 2 keyboard with the impressive instrument he plays today, which uses a bank of gleaming metal pipes to fill the arena with fuller and richer tones, an investment in the game experience, Cook said, and in himself.

It was a dream come true.

But the experience in KeyBank Center this season, and the connection he forged with the fanbase, was like none he could have imagined.

"I knew people really enjoyed the organ," Cook said, "but I don't know if I really comprehended how much people really appreciated it until the pandemic started and I was able to connect with lots of people over social media."

When the Covid-19 shutdown began in March 2020, Cook's wife joked that he was going through "hockey withdrawal" because he watched the movies "Miracle" and "Slapshot" on back-to-back nights. His church and theater gigs also dried up, with houses of worship and businesses shuttered for public safety.

But one day, the Sabres had the idea to support front-line workers by having fans across the region shout "Let's go Buffalo" in unison.

Cook decided he'd provide musical accompaniment and posted a video of himself playing the song on his Twitter feed, @sabresorgan.

It was retweeted by Martin Biron and took off.

This led to Cook posting more videos.

"The organ really sounds the best in person," Cook said. "Acoustics really matter, so I was a little skeptical about doing it just as a recording on my phone. But I figured we don't know how long this (pandemic) is going to go on for and if I can make somebody's day by playing a little song, since everybody was missing sports at the time, I decided to try to do that."

A year ago this week, Cook pinned his version of Paul Simon's song, "Me and Julio Down by the Schoolyard," atop his Twitter profile, tickled by the lyric: "Goodbye to Rosie, the Queen of Corona."

He played Elton John: "I'm Still Standing."

And Tom Petty: "I Won't Back Down."

He upgraded his little music room at his home in Getzville, where he connected a 1951 Hammond B-2 organ to a Leslie 122 speaker beside a framed poster from The Aud.

"Honestly, it was just as therapeutic for me as it was for people to listen," Cook said, "because I'm a musician. That's what I do. And to be able to sort of change the way I perform for people so they could still have some 'live music,' some sort of performance that they could watch from their homes while they're stuck there, was important to me. And from the reaction I got, people really enjoyed it."

The Sabres offered another lifeline, of sorts, when they asked Cook to play home games this season, even though a smattering of fans were admitted for only a handful of games.

The organ music provided some sense of normalcy for players and the broadcast.

"It was interesting," Cook said. "I had my little area over there in Section 120. I'm sitting there and (the mascot) Sabretooth is in his little area over in Section 123, and we're the only two people in the whole arena bowl, pretty much. I made lots of cardboard cutout friends this year around me. It was weird."

On Jan. 13, a day before the home opener, Cook tweeted a video of him playing Petty's "The Waiting (is the Hardest Part)."

During games in February and March, he took requests through the comment section of the Sabres' official Twitter account.

On March 18, when the Sabres opened the arena to fans for the first time this season, hosting several hundred front-line workers for Hockey Fights Cancer Night, Cook played every song he could think of that mentioned the word "doctor" in the lyrics.

"Which was a lot," he said.

On Tuesday, when Cook slid behind the keys at the arena for the final time this season, he began his pregame set with the Golden Girls' theme song, "Thank You for Being a Friend," originally by Andrew Gold.

He continued with "Thanks For The Memories," by Fall Out Boy, then played the theme from Star Wars, obviously, because it was May the Fourth.

"I can't thank the Sabres enough for how well they've treated me and how much they've embraced what I do," Cook said. "And I think the fans have really enjoyed it, also. I walk into the arena even now without people there and there are lights off and it's dark and I look around at the empty arena bowl and I sort of pinch myself and go, 'Holy (smokes), I'm doing this.'"

"I'm really just a Sabres fan who is a very lucky guy to be able to do what he does for the enjoyment of other people. And I'm super glad that people are vocal in their appreciation about it. Hopefully I'll be able to keep doing it for years to come."

## **Sabres could officially clinch last place in NHL standings on Thursday**

By Brayton J. Wilson

WGR 550

May 6, 2021

The Buffalo Sabres find themselves in a spot Thursday night where they could finish in last place in the National Hockey League standings for the fourth time in 10 seasons.

The Sabres will face the Pittsburgh Penguins at PPG Paints Arena on Thursday, and if Buffalo fails to win the game, the team will finish the 2020-21 campaign in 31st place.

In fact, the Sabres need a number of things to happen over the next two games in order to avoid finishing in last place once again.

First, Buffalo will need to win both games on Thursday and Saturday in Pittsburgh. The Sabres will need at least one of those wins to come in regulation to have a chance at preventing another dead-last finish in the standings.

The Sabres will also need the Anaheim Ducks to lose both of their final games this season in regulation in order to leapfrog them in the overall standings. The Ducks wrap up their 2020-21 campaign on Friday and Saturday with a two-game series against the Wild in Minnesota.

If Anaheim earns a single point in any of the next two games, they will be out of reach for the Sabres to match in the standings with total points, no matter what the Sabres do against Pittsburgh.

Unlike past years, the tie-breaking procedures in the NHL have changed a bit with regulation wins (excluding overtime and shootout wins) now being the first tie-breaker if both teams play the same amount of games in a season.

As of Wednesday night, the Sabres and Ducks each have 11 regulation wins this season. If the Sabres match Anaheim's 41 points and after 56 games played and have one or two more regulation wins, they will finish in 30th place.

However, if the Sabres match Anaheim's 41 points in 56 games and finish the weekend still with 11 regulation wins each, the next tie-breaking procedure would be determined by regulation and overtime wins (ROW), excluding shootout victories. In that matchup, the Ducks have that advantage with 15 regulation-overtime wins to Buffalo's 11.

Seems like a cluster of scenarios that need to go in Buffalo's way in order to avoid a last place finish again, but it's as simple as this: Win both games against Pittsburgh (one in regulation) and hope for Anaheim to lose both games against the Wild in regulation.

Anything other than that, the Sabres will finish 31st and hold the best odds of winning the 2021 NHL Draft Lottery on June 2.

## **Fourteen years ago, the Sabres publicly blasted the NHL for Chris Drury**

By Tim Graham

The Athletic

May 5, 2021

In less than 24 hours, New York Rangers owner James Dolan firebombed NHL leadership about a dirty opponent and razed his team's front office to clear a path for Chris Drury.

Fourteen years ago, it was Buffalo Sabres owner Tom Golisano who blasted NHL commissioner Gary Bettman for ignoring a dirty hit on Drury.

Golisano received no satisfaction from Bettman and NHL top cop Colin Campbell in February 2007 when Ottawa Senators irritant Chris Neil delivered a blindside elbow that concussed Drury and left a 20-stitch gash in the Sabres co-captain's forehead.

Incensed over Neil receiving no penalty, suspension or fine, Golisano released to the media an open letter to Bettman.

While the Rangers' scorched-earth statement went several leaps beyond by belittling NHL player safety director George Parros and calling for his job, the Sabres' decision to go public against the NHL was considered at the time a breach of corporate protocol.

"What do you do when you feel really strong about something?" said former Sabres president Larry Quinn, who pushed the open letter. "We weren't trying to grandstand at all, and I don't like that part of it, but what are your choices?"

"We just thought that hit had to be out of the game. There had to be a response (from the NHL), and there wasn't."

Quinn recalled the NHL was displeased with the Sabres' finger-wagging, a quaint approach compared to the Rangers' nuclear-button approach this week.

"Our letter wasn't a defining moment," Quinn said, "but it was important to raise that issue, and I think the league made positive changes after that. There were some hurt feelings that needed to be patched up. Gary felt bad, and I guess I understand his viewpoint."

"It was not a cool thing to do. We just felt it was warranted."

Much of the NHL conversation Wednesday dealt with the league's impotence in handling a greasy sequence from Washington Capitals winger Tom Wilson against Rangers forwards Pavel Buchnevich and Artemi Panarin.

Wilson punched a prone and defenseless Buchnevich in the back of the head. Panarin came to his teammate's defense, but Wilson tossed him to the ice twice. Panarin suffered an injury that will leave the Rangers without their top scorer over their last three games.

The NHL fined Wilson \$5,000 — the maximum allowed by the collective bargaining agreement — and declined to suspend him. So when Washington visited Madison Square Garden on Wednesday night, players took retribution into their own fists.

Dolan fired president John Davidson and general manager Jeff Gorton before the game and promoted Drury to fill both vacancies. In his first game as the boss, Drury watched his Rangers and the Capitals amass 100 penalty minutes in the first period.

Minor league, Drury might have thought.

Because after Neil whopped him 14 years ago, the Sabres and Senators combined for 100 penalty minutes on just the next shift.

Sabres coach Lindy Ruff dispatched maniacs Andrew Peters, Adam Mair and Patrick Kaleta to face off versus Senators playmakers Dany Heatley, Jason Spezza and Mike Comrie. The line brawl was bonkers. Mair cross-checked Spezza and punched him in the head. Heatley tried to skate for cover until Peters put him in a headlock. Senators goaltender Ray Emery skated toward counterpart Martin Biron to throw some bombs. Peters eventually jumped Emery, too.

Ruff later conceded he told the line to "Go out and run 'em," a comment that cost him \$10,000, twice as much as the NHL fined Wilson this week.

"If you look at that hit through today's lens," Quinn said of Neil's blindside elbow, "it would be terrible and controversial and that guy would be suspended.

"Back then, the NHL told us we were overreacting, that it was a hockey play. That's really why we sent the letter out. It had more to do with a fundamental disagreement over something we thought was really unsafe. We weren't going to get anywhere by making a phone call and living with it, so we decided to release the letter."

Golisano's letter, while bold to go public, was diplomatic.

It spoke of "the standard the NHL has adopted that seems to allow violent hits to the head" and proclaimed that there is no benefit "from a policy that allows exciting skilled players to be targets for what I believe to be predatory play."

Quinn, who is not related to Rangers coach David Quinn, was taken aback by the Rangers' statement.

"I don't think that's appropriate because you don't know what the dynamics are internally at the league," Quinn said. "You can't throw it on George Parros. Those guys don't operate without oversight. I doubt very, very much George makes that decision without anyone else being consulted.

"So I thought that demand was too much. I never agree with singling people out like that. It's the NHL, not any one person, that regulates the game."

Over the phone Wednesday evening, Quinn read out loud from Rick Carpinello's report at The Athletic. At the part where Carpinello wrote the Davidson and Gorton dismissals were unrelated to the Parros rebuke, which Dolan "ordered," Quinn noted all that added up.

"Jimmy Dolan doesn't have any great love for Gary Bettman," Quinn said. "So I find it hard to believe he fired those guys over something that embarrassed the league.

"As for Chris and our letter all those years ago, he was our captain. We felt if we can't stick up for our captain, then who can we stick up for?"

## **Anders Bjork feeling comfortable with Sabres, earns promotion to top line**

By Bill Hoppe

Olean Times Herald

May 5, 2021

**BUFFALO** – In a 14-minute stretch Tuesday, Sabres newcomer Anders Bjork erased the New York Islanders' lead, scoring two goals.

First, Bjork redirected defenseman Colin Miller's point shot past Islanders goalie Ilya Sorokin late in the second period. Then Bjork scored from the right circle 10:56 into the third period, tying a game the Sabres would win 4-3 in a shootout.

What do both goals have in common? Bjork, 24, created them by tenaciously pursuing the puck and keeping it in the New York Zone.

On his first goal, Bjork intercepted Josh Bailey's pass inside the blue line. On his second, the winger beat Andy Greene to a loose puck and moved it deep in the zone.

"He was dynamic," interim Sabres coach Don Granato said on a Zoom call following the game. "Getting to pucks, pressuring pucks, hanging on and possessing pucks, and obviously finishing. He's got a lot of talent and he's getting more and more comfortable every day and developing chemistry and figuring out our system and how we want to play.

"It's all adding up and it's fun to watch when that happens. And he's a hell of a good kid and teammate, too."

Bjork capped the night by scoring the shootout winner, giving the Sabres their second straight come-from-behind victory over the stingy Islanders inside KeyBank Center.

Just 13 games into his Sabres career, Bjork, a part of the Taylor Hall trade with Boston Bruins last month, has been promoted to left wing on the first line. He will likely skate beside center Sam Reinhart and Victor Olofsson again in Thursday's road contest against the Pittsburgh Penguins at PPG Paints Arena.

Bjork, having battled injuries and become a healthy scratch in Boston, welcomed a fresh opportunity in Buffalo. The Sabres targeted the American as a player they believe possessed offensive upside and could grow into a larger role.

So far, the 6-foot, 197-pound Bjork has showcased some of the form that earned him a three-year, \$4.8 million contract from the Bruins last year.

Bjork scored two goals and five points in 30 games with the Bruins earlier this season. He has already compiled three goals and six points with the Sabres.

"I'm climbing my way there but there's still a lot to improve on personally," Bjork said. "I'm just trying to get better every day with season winding down here but I'm trying to improve and build for the remainder of this year and then to hopefully carry that on into next year.

"Just trying to learn from the coaching staff and learn from the guys as well. There's a lot of great hockey minds on this team, both young ones and older ones."

After Granato moved Bjork up Monday, he was on the ice for Reinhart's two third-period goals in the Sabres' 4-2 win.

"It's pretty easy to develop chemistry with those guys because they're such skilled players and smart players," Bjork said. "Reinhart has such an ability to slow the play down and make such solid, smart plays and uses his skill so well that it's easy to read off him, and he puts the puck in such a great position.

"Luckily, we were able to capitalize some these past two games here."

Notes: The Sabres, who had Wednesday off, haven't won three straight games since Feb. 11 to 16, 2020. ... Michael Houser, who will likely play again Thursday, is the first Sabres goalie to win his first two starts since Mika Noronen on Oct. 5 and 7, 2000. ... Granato switched Sabres rookie Dylan Cozens, who has played center for most of the past two months, to right wing Tuesday beside center Riley Sheahan and Arttu Ruotsalainen. Cozens, 20, began the season playing wing. ... Winger Drake Caggiula's assist on center Cody Eakin's first-period goal Tuesday was his first point with the Sabres.



## **Hamilton Take2: House Call a welcome one**

By Paul Hamilton

WGRZ

May 5, 2021

BUFFALO, N.Y. — Some of the better goalies in Sabres history have had good starts to their careers.

The third-winningest goalie for this team, Donnie Edwards started 4-0-0. Former first-round pick Mika Noronen won his first three games and NHL All-Star Daren Puppa, and 1984 Calder and Vezina trophy winner Tom Barrasso went 2-0-0.

You know who else has started his Sabres career 2-0-0? Michael Houser. Yes, the same Michael Houser that has played only eight AHL games since 2015-16.

The only player I can remotely compare this to is Jordan Binnington of the St. Louis Blues. Before coming up to the NHL and leading them from last place in the whole league to the Stanley Cup, he had played one NHL game.

The year before that the Blues had Binnington so far down the depth chart, they had no place to send him so they loaned him to the Providence Bruins. That's the season where he finally put up some good numbers and the next year after 16 games in the minors, he got called up, got St. Louis into the playoffs and won the Stanley Cup.

Now don't get me wrong, I am not starting the pilgrimage to Toronto to induct Houser into the Hockey Hall of Fame, but what he did against the New York Islanders in two games was utterly amazing. In two games Houser has looked at 84 shots. That's an average of 40.32 shots per game. His save percentage is off the charts at .940 and he's not the least bit intimidated about being in a NHL crease. Also, don't forget he stopped all three of the Islanders in the shootout too to preserve the win.

When you go from being a goalie in the ECHL to the NHL all in one season, you become the talk of the league and after what he's done, everybody is talking about you and wants to talk to you.

Houser said, "You want to try to answer everybody because everybody is being so supportive and everyone is just as happy as I am, but I wanted to put the blinders on a little bit for the rest of the week and I'll have all summer to answer the thank-yous, but it's been really nice. I love hearing from people that I haven't heard from for awhile, you know people that were there when you first starting playing, so those are really cool calls and texts."

Houser is from Wexford, Pennsylvania. That's about 15 to 20 minutes outside of Pittsburgh and guess where the final two games of the season are, in Pittsburgh against the Penguins. That means mom and dad as well as other relatives and friends will be there, "I've got to get a final number for the count, so that will be really cool, I'm not sure who's playing, but if I'm in there, that will be really cool, having my parents there seeing me play in the NHL will be really fun."

A fun side note is Houser went to the same high school as our Julianne Pelusi, but was two years behind her.

Chances are pretty good Houser will get a game in his hometown. Linus Ullmark has been practicing, but Don Granato said it's going to be very close to see if he can get where he needs to be to play. Even if Ullmark is healthy, I'd be shocked if Granato didn't allow Houser to play in his hometown.

After both wins his teammates came out and mobbed him. I think it's the happiest I've seen guys on this team in the last 10 years and I'm being very serious about that. The guys couldn't be happier for their new teammate and came back from a two goal deficit twice to get him those wins. The Islanders are the best team in the NHL at protecting the lead, so the fact the Sabres could do that two games in a row against last season's Eastern Conference Finalist is an achievement.

## **An Ode to the 28-Year-Old Rookie**

By Nicholas Emanuelli

The Hockey News

May 6, 2021

Do good things really come to those who wait? If you're a goaltender, they just may.

This week, Michael Houser burst onto the scene to become one of the feel-good stories of the season when he made his NHL debut at age 28 after having played a combined 283 games in the minors over the past eight seasons. And in his big moment, the native of the Buckeye State was no shrinking violet. Houser shone in his two starts, providing the Sabres and their fans with a much-needed bright spot in an otherwise dismal season. Houser earned the victory in both games, turning aside 79 of the 84 shots he faced (82 of 87 including the shootout) in the process.

As renowned Buffalo broadcast voice Rick Jeanneret put it after Houser stopped all three Islanders in the shootout Tuesday night: "The legend of Michael Houser grows and grows."

Also this week, soon-to-be 28-year-old Nick Emanuelli makes his debut on TheHockeyNews.com. What are the odds, huh? As a result, I thought it would be fitting to use my first blog to look at the NHLers whose late-blossoming careers had the biggest impacts since the turn of the millennium to see what potentially awaits Houser as he careers toward his 30s.

(For these purposes, only those who made their debut after their 28th birthday have been considered.)

If the netminders who came before him are any indication, Houser's two-game sojourn may not be so temporary after all. Of the 18 goalies who fit the above criteria, five (Roman Cechmanek, Martin Gerber, Tim Thomas, Fredrik Norrena and Niklas Backstrom) would go on to play at least 100 games in the NHL. That is no guarantee, but it's not a bad ratio when you consider three of the 18 were emergency backups and that 28-year-old debutant Pavel Francouz is more likely than not to eventually reach the 100-game plateau as well. That group also boasts three William M. Jennings Trophies, two Vezina Trophies, two Stanley Cups and the 2011 Conn Smythe Trophy.

Comparatively, skaters have a much weaker hit-rate on making it to the century mark in games played. Only seven of the 68 qualified skaters lasted 100 games in The Show. Not a lot of individual hardware there, either.

Nonetheless, here are the five players whose long-awaited NHL careers had the biggest impacts.

Tim Thomas – Boston Bruins (Age 28)

The obvious pick for top billing on this list, Thomas made his NHL debut on Oct. 19, 2002 in a Boston Bruins victory over the Edmonton Oilers. But even after battling his way to the NHL at age 28, Thomas' work was far from over. He would appear in just three more games that season, and then wouldn't tend the crease in another NHL game until January 2006 – only months shy of his 32nd birthday. But from that point on, Thomas would go on to win 211 games while putting up a .920 SP and a 2.52 goals-against average, becoming synonymous with the term 'late bloomer'. The fiery 5-foot-11 netminder led the Bruins to the 2011 Stanley Cup, bringing home Conn Smythe honors along the way. In his career, he would win two Vezina Trophies, play in the All-Star Game twice, and (along with Manny Fernandez) would win the 2008-09 William M. Jennings Trophy.

Niklas Backstrom – Minnesota Wild (Age 28)

The OG Ni(c)klas Backstrom had a career marred by a lack of post-season success, having spent most of his time on middling Wild teams. Had the Helsinki native skated in more than the 11 playoff games did, he'd probably still be more revered today. Backstrom paced himself to a career .914 SP and a 2.49 goals-against average in 413 games. He received Vezina trophy votes in four of his 10 seasons, placing third in Vezina voting in 2008-09. Injuries and - perhaps unsurprisingly given the list he's on here - age would slow Backstrom in the latter stages of his career.

Jan Hejda – Edmonton Oilers (Age 28)

No offense to Jan Hejda, but this may be the only list he has ever appeared this highly on. A classic stay-at-home defender, Hejda never brought fans out of their seats with eye-popping abilities. But some say the best ability is availability. And nobody on this list was more available than was Hejda. The Czech-born defender is the ironman of this list, skating in 627 contests across his nine-season NHL career. His longevity allowed him to rack up more points than all but one of his late-debuting peers.

Derek Ryan – Carolina Hurricanes (Age 29)

No player eligible for this list has more points than Univ. of Alberta alumni Derek Ryan. The diminutive center made his NHL debut on March 1, 2016 against the New Jersey Devils. Ryan would score the Canes' first goal in what would eventually be a 3-1 victory that night. While he has never been a superstar, the hardworking Ryan has gone on to amass 145 points in 339 career games while providing his teams with a spark of energy whenever necessary. Now 34, Ryan is sure to pad his lead in the coming years.

David Ayres – Carolina Hurricanes (Age 42)

Sorry, Leaf fans, you had to know this was coming. Really, any of the three emergency backups to see game action this millennium could be highlighted here. Obviously, the ways in which they impacted the NHL are wildly different than anyone else on this list, but the stories are too fun to pass up mentioning. Jorge Alves and Scott Foster were the trailblazers, and both captured the hearts of the hockey world during their day in the sun. But what Ayres did was truly special. An emergency backup earning the victory in the biggest hockey market in the World on Hockey Night in Canada? What could compare to that?

Honorable mentions: Martin Gerber, Roman Cechmanek, Alexander Khavanov, Pierre-Edouard Bellemare

So there we have it. When you debut at the age most NHLers are reaching their apex, there's not a lot of time to rack up acclaim. But all those above were able to do just that with their limited time in The Show.

So, that's what Michael Houser has to live up to. No pressure 'kid'.

## **Tim Benz: Penguins host Sabres, Wexford's Michael Houser. And it's a story the NHL needs right now**

By Tim Benz  
Pittsburgh Tribune  
May 6, 2021

Wexford's Michael Houser will make his return to Pittsburgh as a Buffalo Sabres goalie for a set of games against the Penguins Thursday night and Saturday afternoon.

If any league could use a story like this at this time, it's the NHL.

After a week that put the ugly side of the sport on center stage with the latest Tom Wilson fiasco, those that want a hockey palette cleanser need look no further than PPG Paints Arena.

At the age of 28, following a year away from in-game competition — and eight years toiling in the minor leagues — Houser finally made his NHL debut Monday night against the New York Islanders. Houser stopped 34 of 36 shots en route to a 4-2 Sabres victory.

On Monday, Houser followed that up with a 45-save performance — including all three shots faced in a shootout — as Buffalo beat the Islanders again 4-3.

So that's two wins via 79 saves on 84 shots over two days after 14 months away from the game.

And more than 28 years of waiting. And anticipating. And hoping.

Through a successful junior hockey career with the London Knights (OHL). Yet not getting drafted — when the draft was actually being held in Pittsburgh.

Through minor league stops in Rochester, Cincinnati, San Antonio, Ontario, Manchester, Cleveland, Tucson and Fort Wayne.

Through 424 games combined between the OHL, ECHL and AHL to the tune of a 252-120-35 record.

Through a pandemic-induced 14-month drought without playing in a game.

Now he's been thrust into action for Buffalo against NHL teams battling for playoff position in the East Division. Next up on the schedule is his hometown club.

"It's been really cool that it happened this way," Houser said during a phone conversation Wednesday. "I've played some good hockey over the course of my career at various times. Any time you play well in the minors you think that you should be getting your chance somewhere. I've honestly just wanted to stay patient and keep working. Over the last three or four years, I've noticed myself getting better."

Houser's road to the NHL was a winding one long before he started his competitive career with the Pittsburgh Hornets Under-16 club. As a child, he had numerous surgeries to correct bilateral club feet. Some of which temporarily confined him to a wheelchair during the offseason.

Until the fourth grade, while Houser was playing in the Pittsburgh area, he and his family were still living in Youngstown, Ohio where he was born and where his father still works even though they have since relocated to Cranberry. So his parents spent countless hours shuttling him back and forth until they eventually moved to the Pittsburgh suburbs.

"Talking to them and hearing their excitement, it felt just as much as my excitement. They have been there the whole way too since I was five years old and started playing hockey. They've seen every step of the way," Houser said.

Houser said he hasn't gotten official word that he'll start in Pittsburgh for either game. But why wouldn't he, with the way he has played and with the way Buffalo's season has gone?

Houser is the sixth goalie Buffalo has used this year. And if he gets the club a third straight win, that'll be their longest winning streak of the season.

Plus, if he doesn't start, there would be some unhappy customers in the house. At last count, Houser was told 16 people are showing up to watch him play.

"I'm letting my mom deal with that with a staff member of the team. That's her ballpark," Houser said with a laugh.

It won't be Houser's first time to PPG Paints Arena as a player with the Sabres. He got a call up to the NHL roster on March 19 and was on the bench when the teams squared off in Pittsburgh on March 24 and 25. But he never entered the game, serving as backup.

"I was glad I got that out of the way," Houser said. "You look over and you see No. 87 and your eyes light up a little bit. But now maybe I'll be in the net. And I'll be more focused on that and doing my job versus thinking about being at home or playing against your hometown team. I'll just be focused on playing well and trying to win."

Yeah. A lot of eyes are on No. 87 at PPG Paints Arena most games. And they often do light up. Although for at least 16 folks in the stands Thursday night, it'll be Houser drawing their attention.

And regardless of the outcome, they'll be happy with what they see.