

Sabres defensemen wage a civil war

Four blue-liners competing for two spots

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Author: John Vogl

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After only two days of training camp, it's become clear the Buffalo Sabres' defense corps will be a scrappy bunch. They're eager to scratch, claw and compete, do whatever they can to succeed.

And that's just against each other.

It seems year after year, the story is the same. The Sabres have a bunch of blue-liners who feel they are NHL ready, yet they have only six starting jobs. This season, they have eight guys competing for the positions, so two will be disappointed.

Interestingly enough, they insist they wouldn't want it any other way. If it were easy, it wouldn't be worth it. The competition should make the players and team stronger.

"That's what you want," defenseman Marc-Andre Gragnani said Sunday. "Obviously, I want to play, but I want to play for a good team. I think I'm on a good team, so I'm very happy about that."

The jostling for jobs will begin in earnest tonight. The Sabres host the Carolina Hurricanes in the preseason opener in First Niagara Center, a quick puck drop for a team that just gathered together over the weekend.

"You'll probably get hit once or twice your first couple shifts, then you get back up and you know you're right at it," left wing Thomas Vanek said. "It's good to get a few practices. You'd probably like a couple more, but playing is good."

Four of the eight defensemen looking to play a large role this season are expected to be in the lineup. Tyler Myers, Andrej Sekera, Mike Weber and Gragnani should play, while Jordan Leopold, Christian Ehrhoff, Robyn Regehr and Shaone Morrisonn will get their chances during the Sabres' run of five games in seven nights.

While the defensemen are competing against the Hurricanes, they also will be competing against each other.

"Everyone knows there's eight guys that are top-six defensemen," Weber said. "Two guys are going to sit. That's why training camp is so important."

"Every year, it's always a little crowded, but it keeps you honest. Training camp is always an audition for a job, and I'm just trying to make sure I have a good camp and make sure I'm starting the season. I don't want to do what I did last year. I want to build off the last 60 games of the season."

Weber was one of the odd men out after last camp. He made the Sabres' roster but played only two games through Nov. 24. He became a regular from there, recording four goals, 17 points and a plus-13 rating in 58 games.

Despite the fine showing, a starting job isn't guaranteed. Regehr, Ehrhoff, Myers and Leopold are locks. The remaining half will need to prove their worth again.

"It's good to have competition," Sekera said. "You've got to work hard every night, and if you don't you won't be out there. I know how that felt, so I'm mentally prepared for that."

Sekera was shuttled in and out of the lineup the previous two seasons before sticking around for 76 games last year. Backed by a new four-year, \$11 million contract, he's certainly got the inside track on significant playing time.

"Coaches will make the decision on what is best for the team, and I just have to respect that and do my role," said the 25-year-old, who is recovered from offseason surgery on a strained oblique.

The two players affected most by the addition of Regehr and Ehrhoff are Morrisonn and Gragnani. Morrisonn was benched last season, and with the Sabres \$3.6 million over the salary cap, his \$2.075 million hit makes his situation unstable.

Gragnani, meanwhile, possesses many of the traits owned by the fine-skating, puck-moving Ehrhoff. But Gragnani showed during the playoffs he's ready to make the leap to the NHL. The AHL Defenseman of the Year led the Sabres in scoring, and it changed his mind-set during the offseason.

"I've never felt better in my life," said the Montreal resident. "I was a lot more strict with myself, going to bed earlier and getting up earlier, never missing a meal, not going out -- I don't want to say at all -- but almost, seriously, not at all. It was all the sacrifices that I need to do if I want to play here and succeed.

"I don't want to just play here. I want to play here and be a factor and have a great year and move forward. If I go out there and I do the best, then I'll sleep at night because I'll know I did everything I could in my control.

"If I play, how much I play, if I don't play, that's out of my hands. I can't stress on that. All I can do is go out there and give 100 percent, and then I'll be happy with myself."

Sabres finding positive in pain

Kotalik enjoys being with familiar faces

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Author: John Vogl

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There's a lightness to Ales Kotalik now, a state of ease that was evident throughout the opening day of Buffalo Sabres training camp Saturday.

It was there when he casually talked with coaches between drills. The relaxed nature shined through when he munched an apple and joked with bystanders while a Zamboni resurfaced the ice. His peace was clear as he smiled and shadowboxed with teammates and equipment managers standing on the other side of the glass at the Northtown Center rink.

Unfortunately for Kotalik, the serene persona he now carries is the result of a horrific event that stole the lives of three friends and made his world come to a halt.

Three of Kotalik's close pals from the Czech Republic played for Lokomotiv Yaroslavl, the Russian league team that was decimated when its plane crashed Sept. 7. Jan Marek, Karel Rachunek and Josef Vasicek were among the 44 who died, leaving Kotalik heartbroken and stunned.

"That's just an unreal, devastating tragedy that happened," Kotalik said. "Back home, I can tell you that time stopped the week it happened. Nobody was really able to do anything else or think of anything else.

"My great friends: It's been really tough, and still it is. It's always in the back of your mind."

The sadness surely won't leave any time soon, but Kotalik has chosen to overwhelm it with positivity.

"I'm looking at things a little differently now with all those tragic things that happened back home in Russia," he said. "I lost three really good friends on that flight, and you see things in a different light, different perspective. I want to have fun, enjoy things. I'm just happy being around people I like and I know."

Sabres teammate Thomas Vanek knows the feeling. He and Vasicek were connected through marriage, with Vanek's brother married to Vasicek's sister.

"He was a good man," Vanek said Saturday. "He was a great uncle to my sister-in-law and my brother's daughter. Overall, he just loved hockey, competed hard, won a Stanley Cup, won world championships, did a lot of good things in the community and just loved the sport."

Though Vanek wasn't as ready as Kotalik to open up about the tragedy just 10 days after it happened, the Sabres' top goal scorer has clearly been affected in many ways.

"We all know it's awful, and you try to move on and just remember how good life is," Vanek said. "When you have a bad day, just look at something like that and your bad day is a good day. It brings you closer to the friends and family that you do have because you realize it can be over any day."

The hope that the devastation can create a positive in the short term rests with Kotalik. His first stint with the Sabres, from 2001 to '09, had its share of down moments. He brooded about his game at times, getting disappointed when things didn't go smoothly.

With his new mind-set to enjoy life through all its twists and turns, the 32-year-old's skills may flourish.

"It's really special to have a chance to be part of this," Kotalik said. "It kind of is like coming home. After the first couple days and week I spent with the guys, we started to feel like I never left. It's probably the best thing in this situation that can happen to me, and now it's up to me to show that I can still be good for this team and make things happen."

Kotalik, acquired in a trade with Calgary following a season spent mostly injured or in the minors, figures to spend training camp in a four-way competition for a roster spot. With 11 forward spots all but locked up -- centers Derek Roy, Ville Leino, Paul Gaustad and Jochen Hecht; right wings Jason Pominville, Drew Stafford, Patrick Kaleta and Brad Boyes; and left wings Tyler Ennis, Nathan Gerbe and Vanek -- the last remaining starting job could come down to Kotalik, Cody McCormick, Matt Ellis or Luke Adam, with the second-place finisher sticking in a reserve role.

"I've got to believe in myself. I hope that I will be on this team and I feel I will do good things for this team," said Kotalik, who will continue to carry his loss but will also carry on. "You just want to enjoy spending time, having fun, because you never know what can happen."

Never say never as Numminen becomes a coach

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Author: John Vogl

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If there was one thing Teppo Numminen was sure of, it was that he'd never be a hockey coach. His father, Kalevi, led Finland's national team while Teppo was growing up, and the son saw how much time the profession took away from a family.

Well, the Buffalo Sabres have added a new assistant coach. His name? Teppo Numminen.

Coach Lindy Ruff has hired Numminen to be the third assistant on his staff, joining James Patrick and Kevyn Adams. The defenseman retired two years ago after a 20-year career, the final four of which were spent in Buffalo.

His first day of coaching came Saturday during the Sabres' opening day of training camp.

"It was exciting," Numminen said in Northtown Center at Amherst. "It's been in the back of my mind. When I was playing when I was young, I said that's the last thing I want to do is be a coach. My dad was a coach, a national team coach, so as a family I grew up there with all the good times and bad times. That was never my option.

"Then the last 10 years when I was playing, I wanted to do something, so coaching was coming up in my thoughts. Retiring two years ago and then realizing that I still care about the game and it's still a passion for myself and I couldn't get rid of the game, just a great opportunity came, and I'm just excited that it worked out."

Numminen will work in the press box on game nights, relaying his thoughts through a headset to his fellow assistants stationed on the bench.

"In the past we've had various people fill that role, and now we're going to have a full-time assistant do it," Ruff said. "He's going to give us a little bit of a European flair. He was a consultant at the world championships for the Finns, who won last year. He's going to be a good addition."

Numminen looked comfortable on the ice Saturday, which could be expected considering he was a teammate of 14 players on the roster.

"It's been all positive," he said. "They're excited to see me, and I'm excited to see them. It's a great thing. I know them, I've got relationships with them, we went to battle together, and for my part it's a lot of respect for these players here. I'm just really happy to be part of their careers again and hopefully trying to help them any way I can."

The transition should also be eased by the fact Numminen played the role of coach on the ice in his final years.

"As a veteran player you try to lead," he said. "You don't realize you might be coaching the younger players, but that's an example of you coaching already while you were playing."

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The Sabres worked out for six hours Saturday, splitting into three groups for their on-ice sessions. Ruff constructed the forward lines, including four that featured NHL regulars.

Derek Roy centered for left wing Thomas Vanek and right wing Jason Pominville. Ville Leino skated in the middle of left wing Tyler Ennis and right wing Drew Stafford. Paul Gaustad was flanked by Nathan Gerbe and Patrick Kaleta, while Jochen Hecht worked between Matt Ellis and Brad Boyes.

The defense pairings weren't as concrete, though Tyler Myers, Andrej Sekera, Mike Weber and Marc-Andre Gragnani skated in one group, while Jordan Leopold, Christian Ehrhoff and Robyn Regehr practiced in another.

"We just tried to divvy up some of the 'D' between the three groups," Ruff said. "I didn't say anybody was going together in particular."

The session included system work on and off the ice, and Ruff had three eager participants in newcomers Regehr, Leino and Ehrhoff.

"For us new guys, we have to first of all look at some videotape and do some studying on what kind of way Lindy wants us to play out there," Regehr said. "There are some changes compared to some of the teams we're coming from, so we'll have to make sure that mentally we're sharp and we're ready to do that right from the start of training camp and in the exhibition games."

The Sabres will skate in Amherst again today from 8 a.m. to 1:30 p.m. before hosting the Carolina Hurricanes at 7 p.m. Monday in First Niagara Center.

Leino gets acclimated to new home

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Author: Bucky Gleason

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The ink was barely dry on his six-year contract worth \$27 million with the Sabres before Ville Leino started calling friends who could provide some insight about Buffalo. His first call was placed to Daniel Briere, who deserved the proper farewell and happened to be an authority on Western New York.

Briere's messy departure was a dark day in franchise history. Many fans turned against him, and some still haven't forgiven him for taking a long-term deal and big money in Philadelphia. The resentment was never mutual, however. Briere treasured his time in Buffalo, where part of his heart remains.

"I called him the next day," Leino said. "He was excited for me and saying, 'You're going to love it there.' Obviously, he was sad for me to leave. He understood how we won, and we had great chemistry. He said the people are really, really nice and that it's a nice city. He said he loved it here and would come back any day."

Leino also speed-dialed former Sabres defensemen and Finnish countrymen Toni Lydman and Teppo Numminen. Their message was basically the same: good city, warm people, great hockey town.

It's a stark contrast to what outsiders often see before settling into the community. Leino's experience was like many -- the airport, Route 33 and a cold, sleepy downtown. It's not exactly brochure material for the Buffalo Niagara Convention and Visitors Bureau.

Still, players' reservations about Buffalo, the city, were nothing compared to their feelings about Buffalo, the organization. The Sabres had a terrible reputation across the NHL for the way they operated and treated players. Everything changed when Terry Pegula purchased the franchise and began backing up his desire to win a Stanley Cup.

Leino climbed aboard.

For the past week, he has been trying to become familiar with his new teammates and surroundings. Heck, he didn't personally meet Darcy Regier until he showed up for physicals Friday. He's living in a town house downtown. He's using his free time to find his way beyond the Hyatt Regency and the Chop House.

"People like it here," Leino said. "It's kind of underground when you come as a visiting team. One restaurant, you're staying in a hotel and it's usually the middle of winter and it's snowing. It's the worst view of Buffalo that you could possibly get. But since, I've talked to the players. I'm seeing what's out there."

Leino isn't here on vacation, of course. The Sabres signed him -- and perhaps overpaid for him -- because they believed he can help them win a Stanley Cup. He took the ice with his new teammates about 7:30 a.m. Saturday for the start of training camp and played center between Tyler Ennis and Drew Stafford.

It could change when the regular season begins. Sabres coach Lindy Ruff acknowledged going into camp that he often puts together "paper lines," which means they look good on paper before he chucks them into the waste basket. Still, the Leino line made for an intriguing combination on the first day.

Ennis is fast and creative, an energetic player and terrific puck handler with a knack for the game. Stafford had a career year last season with 31 goals and 52 points in only 62 games. He showed up for camp looking more chiseled than any time in his career. Leino could be an ideal complement in the middle.

"It's obvious how skilled he is," Stafford said. "He's a special player, just watching how shifty he is. My favorite part about watching him is that you can tell he's has a great hockey IQ. He knows the game really well and is hard on the

puck. With my forecheck and puck possession, his puck possession and Tyler's shiftiness, we're going to be really slippery. Both are really creative. So far, so good."

Shifty, smart and competitive?

Yeah, that usually works.

For all their spending and newfound good will, questions remain about the Sabres' depth down the middle. Derek Roy has been a No. 1 center on this team, but he still hasn't proven he can be a top center on a contender. Paul Gaustad adds leadership and toughness but not much scoring.

Leino is a natural center. He played wing almost exclusively during his first three NHL seasons because Detroit and Philly were loaded down the middle. Both teams needed help along the wing, so Leino accepted a different role. He evolved into a solid two-way forward with a reputation for thriving in big games.

And that's precisely what the Sabres need, a gamer and playmaker who can make a difference in the postseason.

Leino, 27, played for Detroit in the finals in 2008-09. He emerged with Philly a year later with seven goals and 21 points in 19 postseason games. His 14 assists that year were an NHL rookie record for one postseason.

The Sabres certainly remember him from the playoffs. Buffalo had a 3-2 series lead last April before Leino effectively delivered a knockout punch with his overtime goal in Game Six. The Flyers returned home and blew out the Sabres in Game Seven.

"He shows up," Regier said. "The one consistent theme with him is that when the game is on the line, he plays and he competes. You have to have guys like that in order to win a championship. It can't be a seasonal thing that falls off in the playoffs."

In other words, Leino is no Tim Connolly.

Leino, who had 19 goals and 53 points last season, isn't likely to become a 30-goal scorer. He's more passer than shooter and could have 65 points or more if he finds the right chemistry. He should have a much greater impact than Connolly, who had ridiculous skill but vanished in the postseason.

Understand, it could take time for Leino to make the adjustment. Buffalo fans will come to appreciate his skill and aggression. Plus, and this should not be overlooked, he has played in big games and learned how to win from consummate professionals such as Datsyuk, Zetterberg and Nicklas Lidstrom.

And Briere.

"I've been lucky," Leino said. "There are a lot of skilled players you can watch. You see what they do and start doing stuff like them. I've picked up some stuff from Detroit and some stuff from Philly. I'm trying to make a package for myself to get better. It's been working for me. Now, I have a good chance to be one of those guys."

Roy eager to get back to work for Sabres

Center healthy again as Buffalo holds its first practice Saturday

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Author: John Vogl

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Derek Roy spent half the summer in Buffalo, which means half his offseason was spent in a city that is bubbling over regarding the local hockey team. Virtually every time he went out to grab a bite or sip a soda, the folks in Sabreland would gleefully share their enthusiasm.

"People are just coming up to you and saying, 'Oh, I'm really excited about this year, you know?'" Roy said Friday. "They ask questions like, 'How's Terry Pegula?' It's just great to see how people are embracing [the owner] because he's a fan of the game and a fan of the team. I think people really respect that and are really excited for it."

As eager as the fans are for hockey to start — and the season kicks off today with the first practice of training camp — it'd be hard to find anyone more ready than Roy.

That's because he missed all the fun last season. The team's second-half surge, bolstered by a 16-4-4 record once Pegula took over, occurred while Roy was out with a torn quad. He missed the three playoff victories, returning just in time for the disappointing Game Seven elimination in Philadelphia.

As the 2011-12 campaign opens, the fun and anticipation are back, and Roy is thrilled to be part of it.

"A lot of enthusiasm around the city right now, a lot of buzz, and the guys are feeding off that," Roy said following his physical in First Niagara Center. "We're getting treated really nicely around here, and guys appreciate it. It looks like everyone's in shape right now and everyone's ready to go. It's a lot of excitement around the team."

Roy is one of 69 players scheduled to practice today and Sunday in Northtown Center at Amherst. The Sabres — consisting of 40 forwards, 22 defensemen and seven goaltenders — will break into three groups, with the first taking the ice at 7:30 a.m. and the final one wrapping up at 1 p.m.

Every player has entered camp with the same goal.

"To win a Stanley Cup, I think we're all here for that," Roy said. "Growing up as a kid, it's what everyone wanted in their lives. Right now it's not a far shot by any means. The expectation is to go out, get a good start, get the new teammates in there and get familiar with different faces, get a chemistry going."

"A lot of guys talk about the changes, the new players, new faces. It's just a different atmosphere. Walking into the arena now, everyone's saying 'hi' to each other, everyone's happy to be here and happy to contribute. I feel it's going to be good because people are going to work hard and work as a team."

This camp will be different from the Sabres' usual preseason mainly because it will be truncated. The Sabres leave for Europe just two weeks from today, giving them 14 days to get the roster ready. In addition, the exhibition schedule will leave them breathless. Beginning with Monday's home game against Carolina, the Sabres will play five games in seven nights.

The team's traditional intrasquad scrimmage tournament has been scratched. In its place will be a brief yet intense fight for only a couple of jobs.

"We'll have an opportunity for different players," coach Lindy Ruff said. "You already see the excitement with everything off ice that has been going on. The focus has been really good with the players about coming into camp in real good shape and realizing with the number of players and where we're at there's going to be some tough competition for one or two jobs. They understand that. They know it's going to be tough, and we're going to see a real good camp."

Ruff's main chore will be to determine line combinations and defense pairings. He has to find chemistry for newcomers Ville Leino, Christian Ehrhoff and Robyn Regehr. The coach also has to find where Roy fits after half a season off.

"I noticed a pretty determined guy throughout the summer that put a lot of time in," Ruff said. "He's put the work in, and hopefully we can see the same Derek that started last year."

Early in camp, the center will be between longtime left wing Thomas Vanek and right wing Jason Pominville. Vanek took over much of Roy's playmaking responsibilities while the center was injured, tying his career high of 41 assists.

"He's extremely talented with the puck, and he's extremely creative," Roy said. "In the absence of me, he carried the puck a little more, and we'll focus on that this year. If he's going to carry the puck more I'll just go to the net and feed off what he's going to do."

Before suffering the late December leg tear, Roy was on his way to a career year. He had 35 points in 35 games. Now entering his eighth season, he's ready to make numbers such as those the norm.

"I was playing good hockey," the 28-year-old said. "There's always room for improvement. For this year, I've got to improve on some little things and get better as a teammate, as a player and go out there and just be a leader."

Every time he goes out, he'll be accompanied by a fan base that is ready for the puck to drop.

"A lot of fans are excited to see the change in the arena, the name change, change in owner, some different players — it's a great atmosphere right now," Roy said. "We've got to get to work, focus in on camp and get the systems ready, just get focused on the season."

Sabres itching to meet owner's high-priced hopes

Media Outlet: Associated Press

Author: John Wawrow

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BUFFALO, N.Y. (AP)—With extensive renovations still taking place inside the Buffalo Sabres locker room, goalie Ryan Miller couldn't miss the beehive of activity while joining his teammates in reporting for the start of training camp Friday.

"It's pretty amazing," Miller said, referring to the \$6 million project that began in June. "So many contractors and workers in here, I wish they could work on my house like that and get things done quick."

The cost of the renovations are but a small fraction of the more than \$120 million in salaries new owner Terry Pegula has committed in adding free agents and re-signing players this offseason in an immediate bid to transform Buffalo into a bona fide contender.

The rebuilding of the Sabres roster hasn't been lost on Miller, either.

"Terry and Kim, they get things done," he said, referring to Pegula's wife, Kim. "Everything they set out to do, they've done so far."

Now comes the hard part. A month away from opening their season with a two-game road trip in Europe, it's on Miller and his teammates to start delivering on the sky-high expectations Pegula has raised around town.

"We want to win championships," said Miller, whose honeymoon is suddenly over after he married actress/model Noureen DeWulf two weeks ago.

The process starts Saturday, when the new-look Sabres hold their first practice. And it follows on Monday, when Buffalo opens its preseason hosting Carolina.

Miller is part of a returning core group that also features forwards Thomas Vanek, Derek Roy, Drew Stafford and Jason Pominville. Roy is healthy after missing the final half of last season with a knee injury. And Pominville has been cleared for training camp, having recovered after his lower left leg was slashed by a skate in April, during a first-round playoff series loss to Philadelphia.

And Buffalo has a rising star in third-year defenseman Tyler Myers, the league's 2010 rookie of the year, who signed a seven-year \$38.5 million contract extension on Thursday.

The new additions are a trio of veterans being counted on to provide grit, offense and leadership to a team that finished seventh in the Eastern Conference.

Hard-hitting, stay-at-home defenseman Robyn Regehr was acquired in a draft weekend trade from Calgary. The Sabres acquired the rights to and then signed offensive defenseman Christian Ehrhoff a day before the start of free agency. And then Buffalo opened free agency by signing versatile two-way forward Ville Leino.

They were an eye-popping series of moves prompted by Pegula, who purchased the team in February. And they're ones that have changed the perception of what had previously been regarded as a cost-conscious franchise that had difficulty acquiring and retaining talent.

"Just the whole outlook has changed," said Ehrhoff, who signed a 10-year, \$40 million contract. "My goal was to be on a team that's really committed. And ownership has shown that right from the start. This is probably just the beginning."

The Sabres are coming off a Jekyll and Hyde season. Counted out by December, Buffalo went 29-11-6 over its final 46 games to make the playoffs on the final weekend of the regular season. Buffalo ran out of steam in the postseason, squandering a 3-2 series lead against the Flyers.

It marked the second straight year in which the Sabres were eliminated in the first round, and followed two seasons in which Buffalo failed to make the playoffs.

Though excited about the new additions, coach Lindy Ruff is demanding more consistent production from his players.

That includes Miller, whose numbers tailed off last season, when he finished with a 34-22 record and a 2.59 goals-against average. He had seven fewer wins and allowed 0.37 more goals a game than the previous season, when he won the NHL's Vezina Trophy and led the United States to win a silver medal at the Vancouver Games.

And there will be competition for spots. As a result of their free-spending offseason, the Sabres will have to cut more than \$3 million in payroll to get under the NHL's salary cap by the time they open their season playing Anaheim in Helsinki, Finland, on Oct. 7.

General manager Darcy Regier intends to free up salary by making trades.

"It's all good stuff," Ruff said, referring to the team's active offseason. "We've got to work around a few things, but all of this is exciting stuff."

Buffalo Sabres welcome pressure of new season

Media Outlet: Rochester Democrat & Chronicle

Author: Kevin Oklobzija

Date: September 17, 2011

BUFFALO — The promise to transform the Buffalo Sabres from free-agent bus depot to a five-star destination of choice was made on Feb. 22 by club President Ted Black, the same day owner Terry Pegula pledged that the team's one true mission would be to win the Stanley Cup.

The fruits of the July free-agent shopping trip — center Ville Leino and defenseman Christian Ehrhoff — are proof they may be on their way doing it.

Coupled with their ability to convince Calgary Flames defenseman Robyn Regehr to waive his no-trade clause and relocate to Buffalo, the Sabres added three impact players.

"It's probably just the beginning," Ehrhoff said on Friday, when players reported to the First Niagara Center for on-ice testing to start training camp.

"Just the whole outlook has changed here. They wanted to take the extra step to win the Stanley Cup and my goal is to be on a team that's really committed."

Said Leino: "Buffalo right now has become one of those places you want to play. It's a good team and it's in a place where people appreciate hockey."

Ah, but now comes the tough part: expectations.

Pegula backed up his promise to spend. When the puck drops Oct. 7 in Helsinki, Finland, for the first regular-season game, it will be time for players to produce.

"For me, the most important thing is to have expectations," coach Lindy Ruff said. "The second most important thing is really trying to embrace those expectations."

The players, who skate for the first time today at the Northtown Center, say they welcome the pressure.

"There are a lot of expectations around the city, a lot of buzz, and the guys are feeding off that," center Derek Roy said. "Terry has treated guys with a lot of respect and he's putting the statement down that he wants to win the Stanley Cup."

So many critical pieces appear to be in place. Goalie Ryan Miller is widely considered one of the NHL's best. Ehrhoff and Regehr join a defensive corps that includes third-year pro Tyler Myers.

On Friday, Ruff said Myers, just 21, will someday soon be in Norris Trophy discussions when voters honor on the NHL's best defenseman.

Roy, the team's leading scorer in 2009-10, has recovered from a knee injury that forced him to miss more than 50 games last season (including playoffs). He was a point-a-game player before he was hurt.

Right winger Jason Pominville also is healthy after having a tendon above his left ankle sliced during the first-round playoff series against the Philadelphia Flyers.

For now, Ruff intends to reunite Roy with left winger Thomas Vanek. He believes a trimmer but stronger Drew Stafford could be a good fit on the right wing for Leino.

"He's the type of guy who hangs onto the puck and likes to make plays," Ruff said of Leino.

Stafford is noticeably bigger in the upper body.

"It was one of those where (when you see him) your eyebrows go up," Ruff said. "If you're stronger, you win more battles. If your endurance is good, you can maintain a high level of play longer."

Considering where the Sabres intend to be playing, that will be required from each and every player.

"We need everybody to be a little bit better," Ruff said.

Sabres Kotalik has changed

Media Outlet: WGR550

Author: Paul Hamilton

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Amherst, NY (WGR 550) -- Bad luck and tragedy has made Sabres winger Ales Kotalik into a totally different man.

Last season Kotalik hurt his knee. When he returned to Calgary, the Flames weren't doing so well so he wound up being sent to the AHL.

That was nothing compared to what happened on September 7th in Russia. The plane carrying the whole Russian Lokomotiv hockey team crashed killing the whole team. Kotalik was home in the Czech Republic when he got news that his oldest friend from his childhood, Jan Marek was on that plane. Two other very good friends, Karel Rachunek and Josef Vasicek also perished. Kotalik looks at how that changed him, "I'm looking at things a little differently now with all those tragic things that happened back home and in Russia. I lost three really good friends from that flight and it kind of gives you a little different life perspective. I want to have fun and enjoy things. I'm just happy being around people I like and I know and everything else will take care of itself.

You have to wonder as much as hockey teams travel if that crash makes Kotalik think about all the flying he does, "Absolutely you think about it. You have that feeling that it really can happen to anybody. That was just unreal, a devastating tragedy. Back home I can tell you the time stopped the week it happened. Nobody was able to do anything else or think of anything else. For me it was special, I lost three very good friends, one of which I grew up with (Marek) and our families know each other so its been really tough." Kotalik looked away with a tear in his eye, "My great friends, it's been really tough and still it is, it's always in the back of your mind."

What put Kotalik out last year was a serious knee injury. He got 26 games in with Calgary scoring four goals and two assists. You would think getting sent to Abbotsford he would pout and be upset. Kotalik played 76 games in Rochester when he was with the Sabres and scored 18 goals and 27 assists. The winger said his attitude started to change in Abbotsford, "I got hurt pretty badly and started playing in mid December. At the time, the team really wasn't going very well and I really wasn't out there to be able to help in any way. After being sent down I was frustrated about it and to be honest I was trying to get back home, but it was too late because of a transfer deadline in Europe so my only option was to come down to Abbotsford and try to play as best I can. I met some great people down there and realized being mad or angry wouldn't help anybody. There were some great young guys there and I tried to set the example for them because I remember how it was for me when I was starting here in Rochester in 2001. I started to have fun a little bit playing because that was the part I was missing the most. The last two years I didn't enjoy the game, I was always fighting through something. I was mentally relieved, I did well and by the end I was back in Calgary."

Now that Kotalik is back there are no hard feelings he was traded to the Oilers in 2008, "I spent seven years here and those people who are still here, Lindy and Darcy, they gave me a chance to become a NHL player so I will never forget that. They built me some way, they thought I will be helpful to the team so I assume they know what kind of player they built and I'm still the same player, so hopefully I'll get the chance to prove it and everything else is up to me. I'm not thinking about anything else than being a player for this team in any role. I know I can play and I feel good and confident so we'll have to see."

When Kotalik looks at this team is kind of reminds him of something, "I have a feeling that this group is a really good hockey team and I feel similar like we felt in 2006 after the lockout that we had a great core group of guys and some good veterans and some great young players and some of those young players have become true leaders of this team so it's really exciting."

Kotalik knew he wouldn't be back in Calgary except he thought he'd be bought out. Being traded to the Buffalo Sabres was never a thought, "I would be lying if I said I wasn't surprised, it came out of nowhere and it was exciting and it is exciting coming back here and seeing all the guys and all the people in this organization where I grew up and became a NHL player, it's really special and I'm really happy to be back here. It's like coming home, after spending a week with the guys it's like I never left, it's probably the best thing that could've happened to me."

Kotalik played 116 games in 2.5 seasons since leaving scoring just 22 goals and 22 assists. He's playing for his NHL life. Buffalo needs to cut 3.6-million off the salary cap. Many feel sending Kotalik to Rochester is a given. Kotalik looks at it differently. Losing three dear friends has taught him to embrace life. It can be taken away at any time. The winger is enjoying hockey again. He's going to be playing somewhere, he just hopes it's as a Buffalo Sabre.

Sabres Miller is ready to have a better season

Media Outlet: WGR550

Author: Paul Hamilton

Date: September 17, 2011

Buffalo, NY (WGR 550) -- Last season wasn't Ryan Miller's best. His 34 wins was second worst in his career and his goals against went from 2.22 his Vezina trophy season to 2.59 last season. Lindy Ruff has told his players that for the team to be better and to be a championship team, each player has to be a little bit better.

Miller is an inquisitive guy. He's always talking to other goaltenders, coaches and trainers to find out the best way to do things. Miller said, "In my part I felt like last year, some of my summer routine after having a great summer the previous year, before the Olympic year I had a plan in place, the plan went well and I felt great coming into camp. Last summer the plan got a little mixed up, I had a few little things in my training that didn't go well and I thought it reflected early on me. This year I just took care of business, I got myself to where I need to be. I focused on my summer routine and how I could keep some controllable in place and make sure I'm feeling good and to make sure I'm relaxed so physically I feel much better than I did last year coming into camp and that was the main concern for me and also mentally just to take a breath where the previous year I was almost running away and trying to hide out from the really long season. This year I did get away, but it wasn't really hiding out, it was just chill, relax, get centered and get ready for another grind."

As far as what he did Miller said, "I revisited some things I've done in the past, I had an evolution with my training regiment. A lot of things working with my trainer in Michigan and in Los Angeles , we paid special attention to how I was feeling and not just lets grind through the routine just to get through it, it was 'how are you feeling, is everything working in sequence, hips, knees, ankles, lower back, core, does everything move right'. We spent 2.5 months just getting that right. Then a month of building strength and then right back to on ice."

Miller has had changes too because he's been married for two weeks. He said that part of his life has been very positive, "Married life seems to be pretty similar so far. It's funny, right when we got things going she has to work, so she's back in L.A. working and I'm here starting my job, but I think that's what's been great about our relationship is we support each other, she doesn't have to be always right next to me and I don't have to be right next to her for us to do what we do. We just try to enjoy our careers and get the most satisfaction that we can out of it."

As far as the wedding, the goaltender said, "It was a great day and it was fun to share it with family and friends. It felt easy, it was really easy for me I thought I was going to be nervous and it was surprisingly easy."

Jhonas Enroth was able to win some big games last season that helped the Sabres make the playoffs. As far as a work load Miller said, "I want to play, I want to get into a rhythm, but I do want to have time to recover and I want to have time where I can work on my game. It's going to be important for me to have rest, it's going to be important for the team to have a fresh goalie sometimes too so it's a balance. The history since the lockout is the goalies that have raised the Stanley Cup haven't had the full work load for whatever reason whether they were injured, it just seems like timing worked out for them, they had a ton of energy when it became spring time and they had a lot more to give. There's got to be something to it, I'll take that into consideration."

Ruff said all Sabres are healthy

Media Outlet: WGR550

Author: Paul Hamilton

Date: September 17, 2011

Buffalo, NY (WGR 550) -- The Sabres reported to training camp on Friday for physicals and on ice testing. Lindy Ruff said all including Jason Pominville passed.

With a lot of construction still going on down at the arena, camp will be all over the place. The first two days of practice will be at the Northtowns Center while Carolina is in for the first preseason game on Monday. Ruff doesn't mind the disruption, "It's all good stuff, obviously we've got some changes going on and some work being done down here so we'll have to work around a few things, but all this is exciting stuff."

Drew Stafford showed up in the best shape of his life last season and he seems even leaner now. Ruff said, "Coming into last year he got himself in exceptional shape. He went with the same program and tried to build off that and he may be a few pounds lighter, but he's even stronger so he's got himself where he thinks he can play at an elite level. Last year was a great year, but we hope with a little better conditioning he can even build that. I noticed it when he first came in. He was here a couple weeks earlier and it was one of those, the eyebrows go up a little bit. I'll settle for more goals and how does he get them? I think if you're stronger you win more battles, if your endurance is good, you can last longer and play at a high level."

With new players like Robyn Regher, Ville Leino and Christian Ehrhoff, Ruff has to see where they'll help the most. Preseason is key for that, "The job we want to do through preseason is just get them to fit in. They don't have to be world beaters, but they've got to fit in. We've got to find places where they'll fit and if they fit nicely with their partner or linemates and we find something that works."

Now the question is how will Ruff try to fit it together first. He said, "My initial thought is Leino would be good with a goal scorer. He's the type of guy that hangs on to the puck and he prefers making plays instead of shooting the puck so I'd like to try him with Staff. I'd like to go back to Van with Pommer and maybe Derek, but it's an easy flip. I love writing stuff down on paper because usually I can just crumple it up and throw it out. I call them paper lines, they look good on paper, but when it gets on the ice it doesn't gel."

With new players and everything Terry Pegula has done comes huge expectations. Ruff said, "The one good thing is having expectations. The second most important is really trying to embrace those expectations, realizing that the teams that can put themselves in that top five or six teams, have the better chance of winning. I know the expectations are sky high, now it's growing as a team and going through what is going to be an extremely hard season, but having the expectations that we should be able to contend for the Cup."

Sabres' Whitmore becoming hard to ignore

Media Outlet: Niagara Gazette

Author: Bill Hoppe

Date: September 18, 2011

BUFFALO — Derek Whitmore scored 27 goals last season, a shiny number that, thanks to playing on a stacked Portland Pirates club, almost went unnoticed.

Luke Adam was the AHL's top rookie. Marc-Andre Gagnani was the league's best defenseman. Jhonas Enroth was a star in the crease.

Whitmore, meanwhile, was an undrafted 26-year-old.

At times, Whitmore said, he's felt behind the eight ball, far away from the NHL. The Rochester native acknowledged he might've merely been a filler player, a non-prospect, when the Sabres first signed him out of Bowling Green State University in 2008.

But it's becoming hard to ignore Whitmore. The forward keeps getting better. His goal total has increased by 16 in two years, his point total by 25, up to 47. While Whitmore played on the power play last season, he mostly skated on the third or fourth line beside Maxime Legault and Brian Rohloff, who had 16 goals combined.

The Sabres, even with a slew of prospects in the minors, call up the best available player, meaning veterans get a fair shake.

"Hopefully, with the offensive year I had last year, it did open up some eyes," Whitmore said Friday inside the First Niagara Center.

Finally, Whitmore could be close to earning his first NHL recall. Right now, though, he's just hoping for his first preseason appearance in his fourth training camp. It could come in tonight's opener against the Carolina Hurricanes at the FNC.

"The dream is definitely still alive," Whitmore said. "I want to play in this building in front of these fans. They're so passionate."

But at some point in next two weeks, Whitmore will likely drive home down the thruway and begin his \$95,000 job with the Rochester Americans, the Sabres' new affiliate.

Whitmore tested free agency this summer, yet ultimately re-signed on a two way deal.

"I've stayed in this organization because I still believe I can crack an NHL line or be a call-up guy," said Whitmore, who couldn't pass up the opportunity to play at home, either.

Whitmore received strong feedback in his exit meeting last season, giving him some hope. He also believes the Sabres' cap woes — they're currently more than \$3.5 million over — could make him an inexpensive depth option at some point. He would only make a prorated \$525,000 in the NHL.

But that's possibly in the future. Whitmore's excited to return to his hometown, where played his first eight professional games. His father has already purchased two season tickets, and with short trips to Binghamton, Syracuse and Ontario, he figures he can see his son play 60 times.

"At the end of the day, playing hockey in Western New York for either Buffalo or Rochester is not a bad gig," Whitmore said. "I'm pretty excited about the opportunity coming up this season."

Former Hounds GM Torrie excited about new challenge

Media Outlet: Sault Star

Author: Peter Ruicci

Date: September 16, 2011

Losing his job as general manager of the Soo Greyhounds was, to say the least, a painful experience.

But today, Dave Torrie looks back at his departure from a position he'd held for eight seasons, and calls it "a blessing in disguise."

The 45-year-old Torrie is anxious to begin his new job as a scout for the NHL's Buffalo Sabres.

Based out of his hometown, Chatham, Ont., Torrie will scout the Ontario Hockey League along with Michigan colleges, universities and the United States national under-18 program for his new employer.

He's more relaxed today — "It's the best I've felt physically in years," he said — and almost relieved to be away from "the unique pressures and unique expectations" that come with being a GM in Sault Ste. Marie.

"Everybody needs a fresh start and things couldn't have worked out better for me personally," said Torrie, whose contract with the Sabres began Sept. 1 after being hired by the team in mid-July. "I'm glad to have moved on, it's probably something I needed. I'm excited to be joining the organization and being part of the NHL. Anytime you can work at the highest level, it's exciting. These aren't easy opportunities to come by."

Normally, at this time of year, Torrie would be watching his Greyhounds team move through the exhibition season, while evaluating the talent prior to making final cuts.

Asked if he misses the Ontario Hockey League, Torrie said: "At this point, no. I'm enjoying what I'm doing and looking forward to the season."

Beginning next Wednesday, Torrie will spend four or five days attending the Sabres main training camp in Buffalo.

Shortly after, he'll begin scouting young players who may eventually become Sabres property.

"It's all worked out well for my wife (Joanne) and I," said Torrie, who learned he wouldn't be returning to the Hounds on March 19, just prior to the club's final 2010-2011 regular season game. "It's nice to be home after eight years. It's nice to be near family and friends."

Torrie took over as the Greyhounds interim head coach after firing Denny Lambert on Jan. 11.

The team generally played well for him, but it wasn't enough to save Torrie's job. The Hounds finished 10th in the 10-team Western Conference with a 24-36-5-3 record and hired Kyle Dubas as Torrie's replacement in mid-April.

"I burnt the candle at both ends," said Torrie, who spent a total of 13 years in the Greyhounds organization. "There's a burnout factor that goes with that (the general manager's) job."

Before being named GM, Torrie served as a Greyhound area scout for four years and director of player personnel for one.

"All of the other responsibilities you have, it was astronomical," he said. "The number of hours you're putting in, it's awfully time consuming. And the role seemed to expand year after year. Now I'll just be scouting and evaluating talent. How much fun is that?"

Centre Daniel Catenacci, the player Torrie selected No. 1 overall in 2009 with hopes of eventually building a serious championship contender around, requested a trade and was dealt to Owen Sound in late August.

Asked for his reaction to Catenacci moving on, Torrie had little to say.

"That's none of my business anymore," he said. "That's between the Greyhounds and the Catenaccis."

Torrie maintains a friendly relationship with the Catenacci family, saying he speaks to them fairly regularly.

"They have to do what they think is right for Daniel," he added. "What's happened since I left the Sault is none of my business."

While talking to the Sabres about employment opportunities just prior to the June 24-25 NHL Entry Draft, when asked, Torrie said he did offer his opinion on all of the Greyhounds draft-eligible players.

"It was nice to see Daniel drafted by Buffalo," Torrie said. "From all I've been told, he's had a good rookie camp in Traverse City and hopefully, he has a great season."

As difficult as it was at the time to learn he was being let go, Torrie said he wishes the Greyhounds the best.

He says he has no hard feelings and no regrets.

"I have great respect for Dr. Lou (majority owner Lou Lukenda) and really hope his organization accomplishes its goals," Torrie said. "Our mandate when I was there was to build around a core of 93s (1993 birth year players).

And I think there's a lot (of talent) there for them (the team) to work with."

Asked whether he'd do much scouting in the Sault this season, Torrie said he'd like to, but would take direction from the Sabres.

As to whether he would like to see the Hounds do well, Torrie said he has good friends on a lot of OHL teams and would like them to do well, too.

But he did admit he'd always have a soft spot for an organization he spent 13 years with.

"Best of luck to them," he said. "I think Kyle will do a great job. They've moved on and I've moved on. And I wouldn't be where I am today without the opportunity the Greyhounds gave me."

TRAINING CAMP NOTEBOOK

Outlet: Sabres.com

Date: September 18, 2011

Despite some new faces in the locker room, Buffalo Sabres head coach Lindy Ruff has decided to keep one line from last season intact during this year's training camp. The combination of center Paul Gaustad and wingers Nathan Gerbe and Patrick Kaleta is back together and it looks like it will remain that way during the preseason.

"We feed off each other pretty well," Gaustad said. "We fill each other's position well. If it's not me in front of the net, it's Patty or Gerbs, so it's reading off each other and switching positions."

After a slow start to the 2010-11 season in which didn't score a goal until his Dec. 21, Gerbe took off with and finished with 16 goals and 31 points. The second half surge helped him earn a new three-year contract in the offseason. Most of those points came when he was playing on a line with Gaustad.

Last season, the line gave opponents trouble with their aggressive style of play and willingness to be physical in the offensive zone.

"[Gaustad and Kaleta are] big bodies that go to the front of the net. They forecheck hard. It's my job to get open," Gerbe said. "I think that's what makes us a good unit and we're going to try to keep improving."

Kaleta is coming off a season in which he missed 31 games battling various injuries but came back to score three points in six playoff games against the Philadelphia Flyers. Gaustad finished the 2010-11 campaign with 12 goals and 31 points, his highest point total since 2007-08.

"I have high expectations for myself and I have high expectations for my teammates. So I think we're going to hold each other to that," Gaustad said. "That's the start of training camp, holding those high expectations for each other around here and pushing each other. And then that goes with leadership and I think that's the part that's going to make us better."

Gaustad and his linemates will be playing tomorrow night against the Carolina Hurricanes in the team's first preseason game. Ruff said after yesterday's practice that he would like each game's roster to include a variety of both veterans and prospects.

"With five games in seven nights, we're going to have to use a lot of personnel. We don't want to overuse anybody," Ruff said. "You're going to see probably a good mix of a veteran team and young players, probably half and half."

Gametime is scheduled for 7 p.m. at First Niagara Center. It will also be streamed live at www.sabres.com.

-No changes were made to yesterday's practice groups. The same groups and combinations took the ice today.

-Center Jochen Hecht left practice with an injury to his lip, but returned a few minutes later after receiving treatment. However, he did not participate in the second half of his group's practice.

-Defenseman Shaone Morrisonn has been wearing No. 8 during training camp. He wore No. 27 for the Sabres last season.

-Today was the last training camp session at the Northtown Center in Amherst, N.Y. The remainder of camp will be held at First Niagara Center.

OPEN FOR BUSINESS

Outlet: Sabres.com

Date: September 17, 2011

The Buffalo Sabres took the ice today for the first time during the 2011-12 season as training camp officially opened up at the Northtown Center in Amherst, N.Y. With 69 players invited to participate and a stretch of five preseason games in seven nights coming up, head coach Lindy Ruff split up his veterans and prospects into three separate groups

“The first day of camp is always different,” said winger Thomas Vanek. “You try to stay in shape and every guy does stay in shape but your decision-making just has to go from zero to 100.”

Group A, which featured 14 players with NHL experience – more than any other group – skated bright and early at 7:30 a.m. Center Ville Leino, who signed with Buffalo as a free agent on July 1, centered wingers Tyler Ennis and Drew Stafford. Ruff hopes that the playmaking abilities of Leino and Ennis can help Stafford become an even more productive player.

“It’s not something that’s etched in stone but it’s something we want to look at,” Ruff said. “Early on here, we’re going to try it. If it doesn’t [work], we’ll slide different personnel in there.”

Nathan Gerbe, Paul Gaustad and Patrick Kaleta played together last season and Ruff put them back together for the start of this training camp.

Defensemen Tyler Myers, Andrej Sekera, Mike Weber and Marc-Andre Gagnani, all of whom logged significant minutes with the Sabres last year, also skated in the first group in front of goaltender Jhonas Enroth. Myers saw time during the practice with both Weber and Sekera.

Group B featured the Sabres’ two biggest acquisitions on defense as Robyn Regehr and Christian Ehrhoff were paired together for some of their session. Defenseman Jordan Leopold was the other veteran in the group and also took some reps with Regehr. Leopold and Regehr played together in Calgary from 2002-06 and again in 2009.

“As a new player, who have to work with whomever, for me it’s a defense pair, for a forward it’s their line. You have to work with them and create some chemistry,” Regehr said. “It’s a lot of work but it’s a lot of fun, though, too when you come to a new team because there are so many things that are new.”

Ruff said he tried to divvy up the veteran defensemen between the three groups and that no one should read too much into the defensive groupings.

“The defense pairs were just whoever they were skating with. I didn’t say anyone was going together in particular,” Ruff said.

On forward, Vanek and center Derek Roy were reunited. Roy suffered an injury to his left quad that caused him to miss 47 regular season games and all but the final postseason game last year.

Jason Pominville, returning from a severed tendon in his leg that caused him to miss Games Six and Seven of the Eastern Conference Quarterfinals in April, joined Roy and Vanek on the group's top line.

"It does feel nice to be back out there and skating and getting back into the feel of things," Pominville said. "As much as you practice on your own before training camp, when there are coaches out there, intensity rises. Players are a little more physical now than they were in the summer stuff we were doing. It's nice to get this first one by and it'll be nice to get that first game by and go from there."

Veterans Ryan Miller, Jochen Hecht, Brad Boyes and Shaone Morrisonn skated with prospects such as Dennis Persson, Drew Shiestel, Brayden McNabb and Mark Pysyk in Group C.

Former Sabre Teppo Numminen was also on the ice with the team. He's been added as an assistant coach to Ruff's staff for the upcoming season.

"He's going to be the guy upstairs on the headset," Ruff said. "In the past we've had various people fill that role and now we're going to have a full-time assistant do it. His role is going to be helping out on the player development side with the younger defensemen. James' role has elevated during games so he's going to give us a little bit of a European flair."

After talking with Numminen a few times over the summer, he and general manager Darcy Regier made the decision to hire the 43-year-old former defenseman, who retired in 2009. They shared the news with him on Thursday.

"[Coaching has] been in the back of my mind. When I was playing, when I was young, I said, that's the last thing I want to do, be a coach," Numminen said. "My dad was a coach; he was a national team coach. So as a family I grew there with all the good times and bad times."

As he grew older, he realized that coaching would be coming up in his future and would be something he might be interested in pursuing. In leading as a veteran player, he also saw that, in a way, he was acting as a coach to the younger players.

"Retiring two years ago, [I realized] that I really care about the game and it's still a passion for myself and [I] couldn't get rid of the game," Numminen said. "So then just a great opportunity came and I'm just excited it worked out."

Numminen, a three-time Olympic medalist, played 1,372 career NHL games with Winnipeg, Phoenix, Dallas and Buffalo. He served as an alternate captain for the Sabres in 2006-07.

Training camp will continue Sunday morning at the Northtown Center. The first group is scheduled to take the ice at 8 a.m. The Sabres play their first preseason game at 7 p.m. on Monday against the Carolina Hurricanes at First Niagara Center.

Caniacs gather to celebrate the advent of a new season

Media Outlet: News & Observer

Author: Rebecca Putterman

Date: September 19, 2011

RALEIGH -- Watching his 3-year-old son push a puck around a miniature hockey rink outside the RBC Center, Kevin Greene couldn't wait for the National Hockey League season to start.

Neither can the throng of other Carolina Hurricanes fans who attended the 12th annual Caniac Carnival season kick-off event Sunday.

Save for that everyone was wearing a Hurricanes jersey and once tow-headed children had spray-painted their hair red, the carnival appeared like nothing more than a fun family activity on a Sunday morning. From babies to grandparents, they came wearing their matching jerseys, bouncing on Hurricane-themed bounce houses and running the Crazy Caniac Challenge III.

"I can't wait for the season," said Greene, whose wife stood beside him in a matching jersey. Greene has followed the Canes since they were the Hartford Whalers back in Connecticut, and he has turned his family into avid fans.

"I took my wife to her first hockey game, and she's been a fan ever since," Greene said.

They bought their son Fisher-Price rollerblades to practice skating. Greene said he'll probably be a hockey player some day.

Father and daughter team Bill and Julia Thomas participated in the Crazy Caniac Challenge for the second straight year.

After running 1.1 miles around the RBC Center, participants had to eat two hot dogs, drink a Pepsi product and complete another lap. The \$15 entry fee for the race went toward the Carolina Hurricanes Kids 'N Community Foundation, which funds local youth organizations.

"It's good exercise, and it's a good cause," said Bill Thomas, who has been a Canes fan for 10 years.

The spirit of charity was a large part of the event. The Carolina Hurricanes Booster Club sold raffle tickets to win - you guessed it - a Hurricanes jersey, with all proceeds going to charities across the state.

Laurie Cardwell, a member of the booster club since 2006, said charity events help promote the Hurricanes to the larger community.

"You don't have as much of a following here as up North or in Canada. I just wish it was as big as basketball," Cardwell said.

But the Canes' following seemed large enough as fans filled nearly half the RBC Center to watch their beloved hockey players and Hurricanes veterans battle it out against each other in the Red-White scrimmage game at noon.

When the red team scored first, the entire crowd had no choice but to cheer.

Hurricanes players fight for spots at forward position

Outlet: News & Observer

Author: Chip Alexander

Date: September 19, 2011

RALEIGH -- They will try their best to make it hard for Carolina Hurricanes coach Paul Maurice.

That is exactly what Maurice wants.

The Hurricanes have a number of young players eager and willing to fill the few open forward spots on the roster. And Maurice isn't mincing words about what he wants out the training camp competition, noting, "I'm going to be sour if we have to make a decision based on what we think might happen two months down the road. Everyone had early notice we had these opportunities. I'm looking for some driving intensity."

Maurice got it Sunday. The goals came early and then often during the team's Red-White scrimmage at the RBC Center, and while Eric Staal and Jeff Skinner found the net, surprising no one, the names being announced after goals also included Riley Nash, Drayson Bowman, Zac Dalpe, Chris Terry and Zach Boychuk.

Nash, Dalpe and Terry each had two goals for the White, which won the fast-paced but often sloppy scrimmage 10-7. Bowman scored twice for the Red team.

"Obviously there's some spots up for grabs and every guy wants it," Bowman said. Maurice "reiterated that to us before we went out. This is our chance. A few guys stepped up and showed him they're ready."

Maurice noticed. It was, he said, the highlight of the scrimmage, which attracted a large crowd from fans attending the annual Caniac Carnival.

"They were the players who took advantage of what is a scrimmage out there, and at times it really looked like that," Maurice said. "Those guys see the value of that and want to get on the board, and I'm sure every time they see one of their competitors put one in the net, they're driving their game up."

Maurice will be looking for more of that drive tonight, when the Canes open their exhibition schedule with a road game against the Buffalo Sabres. Nash, Dalpe, Bowman and Boychuk will be on the trip.

"This year, we're all coming in trying to do our best - perform well in the fitness tests, perform well in these games," Boychuk said. "Every little thing means so much, so everybody is going to be pushing as hard as they can. It's going to be intense and it's going to be a fun battle."

Most of the young forwards spent most of last season with the Charlotte Checkers, the Canes' American Hockey League affiliate.

Dalpe, Bowman and Boychuk got in some NHL games with the Canes, and Bowman was in the lineup for pressure-packed games late in the season as Carolina fell just short of making the Stanley Cup playoffs.

"There's a ton of quality young guys here," said Dalpe, whose two goals came in the third period as the White surged to the win. "I can only control how I play. At the end of the day, if you lay it all on the line and you feel you deserve to be here, you'll see where you stand."

Veteran goaltender Brian Boucher started for the White team and played the first period and a half. He was beaten by Staal, who scored on a steal and breakaway in the opening minute of the game, as the Red bolted to a 3-0 lead in the first six minutes.

Boucher and Justin Peters, who started for the Red, both left in the second period with the score 4-4. Mike Murphy and John Muse, who replaced an injured Cam Ward in the scrimmage, played the final 30 minutes.

Boucher, who will start tonight, said he has been impressed with the collection of young forwards he sees in the room and on the ice, and not just Skinner.

"There's some talent here and guys really fighting for spots," Boucher said. "It will be interesting to see how it plays out."