



Buffalo Sabres

Daily Press Clips

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Ehrhoff has no trouble figuring things out

Sabres' newcomer making smooth transition

John Vogl

Buffalo News

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Christian Ehrhoff is proving to be a quick learner. Take his neighborhood, for example. Like most Buffalo Sabres, he's located up in the Northtowns. The newcomer discovered right away that one road has it all.

"I kind of got it down by now with Transit Road and all the places," Ehrhoff said. "You figure it out how it all works."

Then there's the more important thing: Ehrhoff's hockey game. He suited up for the Sabres for the first time Wednesday, and he responded with a goal and assist during a 3-1 victory over Montreal. That's the kind of debut folks should like from a defenseman who's just starting a 10-year, \$40 million contract.

"It's what I expected," Ehrhoff said Friday before the Sabres' 2-1 victory in Toronto. "We play a fast-paced, offensive game, and the first game I got a few opportunities to join the play. That's what I like to do.

"It's been fun so far. I'm just going through getting to know all the guys on the ice, getting to know the system better."

Ehrhoff added an assist against the Maple Leafs, and the Sabres expect the point production to become a trend. He increased his totals each of the past three seasons, setting career highs in points (50) and assists (36) last year while tying his personal best with 14 goals.

It's the way he did it that piqued the interest of the Sabres, who host the Maple Leafs in a rematch tonight in First Niagara Center (7 p.m., MSG, Radio 550 AM). The puck-moving, smooth-skating defenseman is exactly the type of blue-liner that coach Lindy Ruff envisions for his system. When Ehrhoff became available via trade just before becoming an unrestricted free agent, the Sabres pounced and gave him the long-term deal.

"We felt he fit with the way we played," Ruff said. "The defense joining, the defense being involved in the offensive zone, it would give us a weapon that we like to utilize."

The ammo isn't hidden from Sabres defenseman Jordan Leopold, who partnered with Ehrhoff on Friday.

"The guy can shoot the puck," Leopold said. "He's got that long slingshot of a wrist shot, and we'll look to take advantage of that every way we can. Just from the few days working with him in camp and watching him briefly, he definitely rifles that thing."

The partnership of Ehrhoff and Leopold would be interesting long term. Both are quick to join the offensive rush, giving the Sabres the constant threat of a four-man attack. Of course, someone would have to reel in his offensive tendencies from time to time.

"It'll be interesting to see us playing together," Leopold said. "We both like to get up, but whoever gets the opportunity, great, go for it."

Ruff is using training camp as a testing ground for pairings, so nothing is set yet. Whenever Ehrhoff gets his partner, it shouldn't take much time for the duo to get used to each other, at least based on Ehrhoff's early learning ability.

"Lindy was telling me it's going to be similar to the style we played in Vancouver, so hopefully it's not going to take long for me to adjust," Ehrhoff said. "Obviously, it's going to take some time for me to get to know everybody well, but I'm well on the way."

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Ehrhoff helped the Sabres improve to 3-0 in the preseason, assisting on Jason Pominville's game-winner on the power play at 12:27 of the third period.

Corey Tropp scored off a Matt Ellis assist at 7:15 of the first period to give the Sabres the lead. Phil Kessel knocked in a loose puck near the crease to tie it for Toronto at 8:32 of the second period.

Sabres goalie Ryan Miller played the whole game and finished with 33 saves. James Reimer made 31 stops for Toronto.

Derek Roy left the game with what Ruff described as a minor shoulder injury.

Prior to hosting the Leafs tonight, the Sabres will make a grand entrance on a blue and gold carpet set up in the plaza. The players are set to begin arriving at 4:30 p.m.

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The Sabres trimmed their roster for the second time this week, sending 11 players down to Rochester.

The Sabres demoted forwards Riley Boychuk, Jacob Lagace, Maxime Legault, Shawn Szydlowski, Travis Turnbull and Mark Voakes; defensemen Alex Biega, Nick Crawford, Corey Fienhage and Matt MacKenzie; and goaltender Jeff Jakaitis.

The Sabres have 41 players still in training camp (24 forwards, 13 defensemen and four goaltenders). Rochester's camp begins Monday.

Sabres broadcasts get HD boost

Greg Connors

Buffalo News

September 24, 2011

There is high-definition light at the end of the tunnel for Buffalo Sabres fans who subscribe to Verizon FiOS television.

The Federal Communications Commission on Thursday issued a ruling that directs Madison Square Garden Inc. and Cablevision Systems Corp. to license Sabres games and other MSG sports offerings to Verizon and AT&T within 30 days.

MSG has been withholding its HD feeds from Verizon and AT&T, but making them available to cable companies, including Time Warner. Standard-definition feeds of Sabres, New York Rangers and New York Knicks games, among others, have been the only option for Verizon FiOS viewers.

Verizon and AT&T had filed complaints with the FCC saying the HD feeds were being unfairly withheld, and the FCC in effect agreed with them.

"The commission has concluded that HD programming is growing in significance to consumers and that consumers do not consider the standard definition version of a particular channel to be an adequate substitute for the HD version," the FCC order said.

The FCC has directed MSG and Verizon to reach an HD carriage agreement within 30 days. It's not clear if that timetable will hold because Cablevision, the former parent company of MSG, is vowing to fight the ruling.

"The data clearly demonstrates that there has been no competitive harm to the nation's two largest phone companies as a result of not having two HD channels they already receive in SD," a Cablevision statement said. "Instead of competing on the merits in the marketplace, Verizon and AT&T are manipulating federal law to gain an unfair advantage and we have every intention of pursuing relief in the courts."

In response, John Bonomo, director of media relations for Verizon, said, "It is unfortunate that even after an FCC order, that Cablevision would elect to further delay competition and a level playing field, and more importantly, HD broadcasts for Sabres fans."

Ryan realistic about role with Sabres

Bill Hoppe

Niagara Gazette

September 24, 2011

TORONTO — At some point in the next week or so, Michael Ryan will head to Rochester, a place he knows all too well. Over four seasons last decade, Ryan played 210 games with the Americans, most of them in the shadow of the Buffalo Sabres' stable of slick youngsters.

Back then, Ryan was a prospect, too. But players like Jason Pominville, Derek Roy, Thomas Vanek, and later, Patrick Kaleta, received the lion's share of the attention.

All the while, Ryan quietly kept developing. He eventually earned a long recall late in 2006-07, and his sturdy play forced the Sabres to re-sign him for regular duty. But injuries derailed the winger during his one full NHL season, an omen.

Playing only 46 times that year, failing to seize his opportunity always bugged Ryan. That's why the 31-year-old, an AHL star, decided to sign a one-year deal with the Sabres in August.

"Just give it one more go, one more shot here, try to play a full season ... see what happens," said Ryan, who played 12:24 in the Sabres' 2-1 exhibition win Friday over the Maple Leafs at the Air Canada Centre.

The Sabres received a major scare late in the first period, when Roy, the No. 1 center, hurt his shoulder "a little bit" and never returned. The injury won't sideline Roy long term, coach Lindy Ruff said.

Injuries have ravaged Ryan recently. A concussion, groin and hip problems have all plagued him. In the three seasons since he left, Ryan has played only 119 times, including only three games in 2009-10.

Ryan, however, said he's healthy now, and returning to his first organization (Dallas actually drafted him) is comforting. Since the American skated in his last game for the Sabres on April 5, 2008, he's played in Russia (very briefly), Nashville, Albany, Raleigh, Springfield, Mass. and Glens Falls.

"I definitely appreciate it a lot more," Ryan said about his career. "It's nice to be back with a lot of friends like that. It's pretty cool. Every day, it kind of feels like four, five years ago, being back around all these guys."

Ryan's realistic about this season. He knows he's heading to the minors, where if he can play a full campaign, he might score 40 goals. He has 70 tallies and 137 points in his last 151 AHL games.

He believes at some point the Sabres may utilize him.

"I just take it day-by-day, and maybe in November, maybe in March, who knows, maybe I can get back here?" Ryan said.

Ryan certainly offers the Sabres depth and versatility.

"I've played like every type of role in this organization, whether it was a scoring role in the minors or more of a checking role here," Ryan said.

Ruff agrees.

“In an injury situation, you replace a skill guy, he comes up and plays,” Ruff said. “If it’s an energy, fourth-line, penalty-killing player, Michael has that experience to play in those situations. You’re getting probably a faster Matt Ellis that knows how the game needs to be played.”

Corey Tropp scored early Friday, and then Pominville’s power-play tally 12:27 into the third period held up as the Sabres improved to 3-0 this preseason.

The Sabres faced old friend Tim Connolly, who played in Buffalo from 2001-11, for the first time since the center signed with the Leafs over the summer.

“To be honest, it felt like another game,” said Connolly, who wears No. 12 with the Leafs, apparently in honor of former Bills quarterback Jim Kelly. “There wasn’t a lot of talking between me and their team.”

Ruff added: “You’re thinking about a few plays that he may try, a couple of faceoff plays that he’s always been in on. You’re hoping he has success, but just not tonight.”

Connolly had zero points and was a minus-1 in 16:14 on the ice. He centers Phil Kessel, who scored the Leafs’ goal, and Joffrey Lupul.

Notes: Pominville served as captain; winger Nathan Gerbe and defenseman Jordan Leopold were assistants. ... The Sabres host the Leafs tonight. Goalie Jhonas Enroth is expected to start. The Sabres also play Sunday in Columbus. ... Winger Ales Kotalik and defenseman Shaone Morrisonn, the two players mentioned most as cap casualties, haven’t played in any of the Sabres’ three preseason games. ... Sabres goalie Ryan Miller made 33 saves in his first 60-minute effort this preseason.

Miller solid as Sabres beat Leafs 2-1

The Canadian Press

September 23, 2011

TORONTO - The Toronto Maple Leafs had no difficulty creating scoring chances Friday.

The trouble was, Buffalo Sabres goalie Ryan Miller(notes) already looks to be in top form.

Miller stopped 33 shots and Jason Pominville(notes) scored on the power play at 14:42 of the third period as the Sabres won their third straight pre-season game, 2-1 over the Maple Leafs.

"Miller made some big saves for them. He's a good goaltender, you've got to get traffic in front of him and get him moving and he made some key saves," Leafs defenseman John-Michael Liles(notes) said. "Obviously you have to focus on him each and every game but we'll continue to try to do those things and try to get traffic in front of him."

The Leafs killed off four penalties in a row before Pominville finally struck for the Sabres with the man advantage to break a 1-1 tie.

With Cody Franson(notes) in the box for holding, the puck got caught in some traffic in front. Pominville was in the right place to snap in his second of the pre-season past Leafs goalie James Reimer(notes).

Apart from the two goals, Reimer was solid in making 31 saves. He had to be up to the challenge early, as Buffalo came out the stronger of the two teams.

"All I had to do was stand on the top of my crease and be big and they were forcing them to take shots on the outside and they were hitting me in the chest," Reimer said. "I felt really good but it's a credit to the way our team played."

With both sides featuring almost full-strength squads, Buffalo's early pressure was ultimately rewarded with the opening goal at 7:15 of the first

Buffalo's Matt Ellis(notes) fed rookie Corey Tropp(notes) off a Leafs turnover and he beat Reimer low for a 1-0 lead.

Despite getting off to a slow start, Toronto pressed late in the first. With 14 minutes gone, Nazem Kadri(notes) had a few cracks at a loose puck at the side of the net but Miller stacked the pads to keep the Leafs off the scoreboard.

Toronto sniper Phil Kessel(notes) had a few chances to even the score in the opening minutes of the second, but Miller stopped everything that came his way.

"Any time I can look across the ice and see a world class goalie like Miller, it does inspire you to give that little extra jump to see if you could beat them," Reimer said.

Despite being outshot 15-4 in the second period, the Sabres nearly doubled their lead six minutes into the period. On a rare foray into the Leafs zone, T.J. Brennan(notes) rang a shot off the crossbar that beat Reimer cleanly.

The play leading up to Toronto's equalizer was started and finished by Kessel. Kessel started the play by passing to Liles, who brought the puck right in front of the net before being checked. The loose puck fell to Kessel, who banged it in at 8:32 of the second.

"In the second period, we got off to a good start. There was some good forechecking and we controlled the play for most of the period," Leafs head coach Ron Wilson said.

Miller saved the game for the Sabres just seconds after his team had taken the lead. Having played himself out of position, Miller sprawled back and get his glove to a goal-bound shot off the stick of Joffrey Lupul(notes).

"Obviously we would have liked to get the big goal at the end but, especially in the second period I thought we started looking pretty good on the cycle," Lupul said. "We made some good plays so we're still a work in progress."

Tyler Myers learns from sophomore slump

Kevin Allen

USA Today

September 24, 2011

Buffalo Sabres defenseman Tyler Myers experienced a lengthy, miserable sophomore slump in 2010-11 and today he views that pain as his gain.

"It is hard to say this, but I'm glad that it happened because I learned a lot from it," Myers said.

After being named NHL Rookie of the Year in 2009-10, Myers was minus-12 before his second season was a month old. He was minus-15 at one point in January. But by the end of the season, his plus-minus was zero, evidence of how much he learned by his mistakes

"I had a terrible first half, and I will be the first to admit that," Myers said. "But as bad as my first half was, I'm really happy with the way I responded in the second half. It was a huge learning experience. Even the mindset I have coming into this season is night and day different than it was last season."

Myers said it took him until last Christmas to figure out how to be as effective as he was a rookie when he was among the NHL's most dominant defensemen.

"I felt like I had to do a lot more than I did," Myers said. "I didn't take into account that less is more. It took me a long time to figure that out."

Essentially, Myers, now 21, had difficulty finding the line he needs to straddle to maximize his impact. It's always a struggle for a young defenseman to figure out to balance his game between his defensive and offensive responsibilities. It's even more challenging for a 6-8 defenseman who also needs to use his size as a weapon. It took Boston's Zdeno Chara several NHL seasons to figure out how to become the monstrous force he is today.

"I was overloading myself (early last season)," Myers said. "It was funny that when I started to concentrate on doing less, my numbers started to climb."

Myers did have 11 fewer points, but he finished with 10 goals, a respectable total, given his first-half struggles.

"To me one of the biggest positives of last season was how he turned his game around," Buffalo general manager Darcy Regier said. "Sometimes you get off to a poor start in your sophomore year and you don't recover from it. In his case, as tough of a first half as he had, he was able to turn the corner and had a second half that was like his Calder (Trophy) year."

He again looks like a player who someday might be able to be a Norris Trophy contender.

"I don't think I have it completely figured out, but a lot more than last season," Myers said. "I will know how to handle it if it creeps up on me again. Mentally I feel more prepared."

At this point in training camp, one of the Sabres' big questions is whether to pair Myers with highly respected defensive defenseman Robyn Regehr, acquired from the Calgary Flames in the offseason. Regier said no decision has been made yet about the pairings.

"Regehr's size, composure, aggressiveness, experience and leadership," Regier said, "I can't see why those won't be real assets for Tyler's career as well."

The Sabres showed they have no concern about Myers' potential this summer by giving him a seven-year, \$38.5 million extension.

"He takes responsibility for himself as a player," Regier said. "That's a pretty good (trait) to have at his age."

THE AFTERMATH: SABRES 2, LEAFS 1

Kevin Snow

Sabres.com

September 24, 2011

TORONTO (AP) - Jason Pominville scored on the power play at 14:42 of the third period Friday and the Buffalo Sabres won their third straight preseason game, 2-1 over the Toronto Maple Leafs.

The Maple Leafs killed off four previous penalties before Pominville connected for the Sabres with the man advantage.

With Cody Franson in the penalty box for holding, the puck got caught in some traffic in front. Pominville was in the right place to snap in his second of the preseason past Leafs goalie James Reimer.

With both sides featuring almost full-strength squads, Buffalo dominated the bulk of the early exchanges with the Sabres' opening goal coming at 7:15 of the first. ...more.

Even if it was a preseason game, Corey Tropp will never forget his first goal in a Sabres uniform. With the puck deep in the Toronto zone, defenseman Keith Aulie's clearing attempt is picked off just inside the blueline by Matt Ellis who finds Tropp alone in the slot. Tropp turns quickly, makes another quick move and slides the puck between James Reimer's pads. "Ellie did a great job stepping up," Tropp explains. "He made a heck of a pass to me in the slot, and I just tried to get it off as quick as I could."

Miller

Ryan Miller. Turned away 33 Toronto shots to earn the victory, including 14 of the 15 that were sent his way in the second period. Miller's biggest save of the night came at 12:45 of the third period when he stopped Joffrey Lupul not once, but twice. The second save even drew some applause from the Toronto crowd as he had to reach back to snag Lupul's shot in the crease. Miller realizes it's still the preseason, but knows that he can always improve. "For me it's crucial to stay in the plays and not over commit; and the few times I did over commit tonight, I got kinda fortunate. I just have to watch for that."

- Buffalo has started the preseason 3-0 for the first time since 2000. The Sabres won seven straight to open that preseason, and finished 7-0-1.
- Jason Pominville was designated as Buffalo's captain tonight, while Nathan Gerbe and Jordan Leopold were the assistants.
- Nathan Gerbe talked about the late game scrum that started when Toronto crashed the net with 21 seconds left in the third, and resulted in misconduct penalties to Patrick Kaleta and Clarke MacArthur: "That's just competitiveness. We want to protect Ryan as much as possible, and when guys get in the paint we're going to do anything to stop that."
- Of the 20 players in Buffalo's lineup tonight: 12 were acquired through the draft; five were free agents; two arrived via trades, and Matt Ellis is the only waiver claim.
- The Sabres were outshot 34-33 on the night, with 29 of those shots coming in the first and third periods. Buffalo was outshot 15-4 in the second period.
- Pominville has now scored in each of Buffalo's last two games.
- Pominville and Brad Boyes each took a game-high four shots for Buffalo.
- Christian Ehrhoff assisted on Pominville's game winner, giving him three points (1+2) in two games.

- Paul Gaustad led both teams with 13 faceoff wins.

- The Sabres are now 137-146-48 all-time in the preseason, and 24-10-2 since the start of 2005-06.

- This was the 64th all-time preseason game between the Sabres and Maple Leafs since 1974. Buffalo holds a 31-27-6 advantage, and they are now 14-8-2 in Toronto.

These same two teams close out their home-and-home series Saturday night at the First Niagara Center at 7 p.m. The game will be preceded by the "Blue & Gold Carpet Walk" beginning at 5 p.m. The Sabres will wrap up their three-game weekend Sunday afternoon in Columbus. Game time is 5 p.m.

Leafs fall to Sabres as Miller outduels Reimer

Brian McGran

Toronto Star

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If James Reimer ever wants to measure himself against another goalie to see just how good he is, there may be no finer example than the guy that was in the Buffalo Sabres net Friday night.

Ryan Miller outduelled Reimer — as he usually does to Leaf goalies — and the Buffalo Sabres skated their way to a hard-fought 2-1 win at the Air Canada Centre.

Even the presence of ex-Sabre Tim Connolly on the Leafs' top line didn't help Toronto against Miller, who was at his Leaf-killing best. He stopped numerous breakaways and held the Leafs to just one goal in a second period that was played almost exclusively in the Buffalo end.

Only Phil Kessel — with his first of the pre-season — could beat Miller, who made a game-saving save on Joffrey Lupul late in the third. John-Michael Liles passed to Lupul in the slot with Miller out of position, having overplayed the pass. Lupul shot at the empty net, but somehow Miller got a glove on it. Jason Pominville, who had repeatedly been robbed by Reimer, had just put Buffalo up 2-1 prior to the Lupul chance. Reimer, with a far better outing than Tuesday's loss to Philadelphia, seemed comfortable and confident in the net.

There could be no excuses from either goalie about the quality of players in front of them. The Leafs dressed 15 NHLers, including their top two lines.

The Sabres dressed 13 regulars, although they lost Derek Roy to injury in the second period.

The Leafs' top unit of Connolly, Kessel and Lupul seemed unsure of themselves, tentative with the puck, in the first period. Connolly muffed a few passes. Lupul seemed intent on setting up Kessel. But they gained their footing as the game went on, especially in the second.

The Mikhail Grabovski line with Clarke MacArthur and Nikolai Kulemin — the best line from last season — was the Leafs' best line in terms of puck possession and forechecking. The third line saw the late insertion of Darryl Boyce at centre in place of Tyler Bozak. The wingers, Nazem Kadri and Matt Frattin, worked very well together. That's refreshing, considering they're essentially competing with each other for a spot.

The defence played an aggressive game, and from the second period on didn't allow themselves to get pinned in. Cody Franson had the most trouble clearing the zone, but he got his shots through to Miller at the other end. Liles, Jake Gardiner and — of course — Dion Phaneuf weren't shy about joining the rush. Carl Gunnarsson was the steadiest — if least flashy — of the bunch. And Keith Aulie showed some real legs in beating Sabres speedster Nathan Gerbe to a puck to prevent a breakaway.

The teams were tied 1-1 after 40 minutes after two diametrically opposed periods of hockey.

The first was all Buffalo, with the Sabres outshooting Toronto 12-7 and Corey Tropp beating Reimer for a 1-0 lead.

Reimer made a few key saves early, but surely wishes he had Tropp's goal back. Tropp, who scored 10 goals in a full season in the minors last year, got the puck at the circle and beat Reimer between the pads.

The second period, however, was all Toronto, with the Leafs outshooting Buffalo 15-4. The Leafs' forechecking in the first few minutes of the frame was so overwhelming that Sabres coach Lindy Ruff called a timeout. And if not

for Miller, the Leafs would have been up a handful of goals. Only Kessel was able to beat Miller in the second, tipping in a loose puck with Miller sprawled across his crease.

As dominant as the Leafs were that period, they had trouble getting shots through traffic. And when they did, Miller was at his usual, dominant best.

The two teams play again Saturday night in Buffalo.

Connolly and linemates blanked again

Lance Hornby

QMI Agency for SLAM! Sports

September 24, 2011

TORONTO - Tim Connolly didn't take a wrong turn into the visitors' dressing room, go into the Sabres' huddle when Lindy Ruff called time, or blindly follow the QEW Niagara signs on the drive home.

So the cord was officially cut in his first game against his old team. What Connolly badly wanted to do was score against the Buffalo Sabres — or have Phil Kessel convert one of the many chances Connolly set up. The Leafs video crew are still going to have to resort to B-roll of Connolly, Kessel and Joffrey Lupul fooling around in practice if they want clips of a goal.

The line was shut out again, but was much better in Friday's 2-1 loss than their jittery debut against the Flyers.

"I'm sure it'll be a little weird, seeing all the old faces and the old uniforms," alternate captain Connolly said before the game. But once the anthems ended, it was back to business.

Connolly had three missed shots on goal, but was happy to be 11-of-20 on the draw, with a couple of nice deliveries to Lupul for one-timers.

"That's one thing you don't get to practice in summer hockey," Wilson said of Connolly's work in the dots.

Connolly's career faceoff numbers aren't great, below 47% the past three years, and he lost two key draws with James Reimer on the bench in the final 21 seconds.

But at least the change of sweaters took one of Buffalo's most efficient Leafs burners out of circulation. Connolly's 32 points in 39 career games against Toronto are the most he's rung up against any opponent.

"There wasn't a lot of talk out there between me and their team," he said. "They came out on top this time. I'm happy to be a Leaf, there's excitement in this city, it's a historic franchise and it's cool to be a part of it."

As Connolly had not played since the 4-0 shutout loss to the Flyers, it was deemed best to use him Friday in the opener of the home-and-home series against the Sabres, rather than Saturday at the newly christened First Niagara Center. There will be plenty of time for the Syracuse native to prepare for his return as the clubs don't meet there in the regular season until Dec. 16.

By then, his line should be quite comfortable, three former first-round draft picks of other NHL teams, looking to prove something to their previous employers.

Perhaps trying to take the spotlight off them until they get more comfortable, Wilson keeps insisting he has two No. 1 lines, pumping up another unit that features an ex-Sabre. Clarke MacArthur was scrapping last night as he, Nikolai Kulemin and Mikhail Grabovski missed their own opportunities to tie it late in the game.

As for the other elements of the Toronto — Buffalo rivalry, goaltenders Ryan Miller and Reimer staged a nice duel through 77 total shots, though Reimer had a couple of posts and fortunate bounces before Jason Pominville's power-play winner with 7:33 to go.

Kessel did beat Miller earlier, but it was during a line change when he converted a play from Nazem Kadri and defenceman John-Michael Liles. Miller salvaged the win with an amazing stretch glove save on Lupul.

The size the Leafs have added on the blueline since the start of last season, Cody Franson and Keith Aulie, should be effective against many small-fry Sabres forwards in the coming six-game regular-season series, though the big duo and Dion Phaneuf spent some time in the penalty box.

A day after the Flyers' Jody Shelley was suspended 10 games for his hit on Leaf Darryl Boyce, Phaneuf was called for the new head-shot minor on an unsuspecting Michael Ryan.

The Leafs captain was miffed in his second call deemed to be close to the noggin of an opponent, but as one of Friday night's referees explained to him, everyone is learning on the go.

"I stood up, made the hit and made contact with his body," Phaneuf maintained. "I've never been suspended for going after a guy's head. I won't be hesitant to make an open-ice hit. That was a good hockey hit. You have to protect yourself. You can't be looking back. It's been like that for years if you're coming through the middle of the ice.

"I agree with taking head shots out, snout-sticking elbows out and not hitting guys from behind. But it's a fast game and open-ice hits are part of that."

Leafs' rookie defenceman shines

Steve Buffery

QMI Agency for SLAM! Sports

September 24, 2011

TORONTO - That trade Brian Burke made last February to get Joffrey Lupul and Jake Gardiner from the Anaheim Ducks for defenceman Francois Beauchemin could turn out to be a rather significant steal.

And not because of Lupul.

Gardiner, a rookie defenceman, has been a revelation of sorts for the Leafs in the pre-season with his wheels and offensive skills. In three games, he has two points, but more importantly the 21-year-old has demonstrated a poise beyond his years.

"He's been a lot better than I expected him to be," said Leafs coach Ron Wilson. "In the rookie game he was a little tentative, but his confidence has really grown. That kid can really skate and it gets him out of a lot of danger."

Big Burkie obviously has thought highly of Gardiner for some time, having drafted the Deephaven, Minn., native 17th overall in 2008 when he was the GM of the Ducks. Gardiner's not huge, but at 6-foot-2, 184 pounds, he's no shrinking violet either. He had another strong game on Friday night, playing almost 22 minutes and was selected a third star against the Buffalo Sabres.

"I think he's a great D-man, a great pucking-moving D-man," said Leafs goaltender James Reimer. "That stretch pass he made to (Matt) Frattin, that was a heckuva play. I wasn't yelling at him that the guy was open, I don't know if anybody was. It was just his own vision. It's pretty impressive to see a guy with that much poise so early in his career."

Gardiner's certainly been one of the better defencemen in the pre-season and if he continues to play well, he may force the club to make a difficult decision as to who gets sent down to the Marlies and who stays.

"He's really putting heat on the other defencemen for sure," said Wilson.

BE HAPPY LEAFS NATION

Big Burkie goes on a mini-rant during the pre-season about how the media has to stop blaming the team's 44-year Stanley Cup drought on the current players, all of whom weren't born the last time the Blue and White lifted the Cup. The message was basically to stop bringing up 1967 all the time. But then the Leafs unveil their third sweater on Friday and it's an identical throwback to the Leafs' 1967 sweater, the last year they won the Cup. Hey, Leafs fans are Cup-starved. As Bob Dylan once said: "You gotta blame somebody" (or words to that effect).

STILL WAITIN'

Note to the Ottawa Senators and Winnipeg Jets, who play at the Mile One Centre on Monday in St. John's Nfld. Don't make any promises that you'll be back. The good citizenry of the Newfoundland capital are still waiting for the Toronto Raptors to return. Raptors management promised to return to St. John's for a game after a 2003 pre-season tilt against the Cleveland Cavaliers was cancelled because of moisture on the court. One can only assume that the Raptors are waiting for a block of seats to open up on Air Canada's Toronto to St. John's route.

OUT OF SIGHT, OUT OF MIND

Speaking of Raptors, there are no longer any Raptors pictures hanging on the wall in the ACC media room. Normally, pictures of Leafs and Raptors hang side-by-side. But according to Raptors media relations guy Jim LaBumbard, images of NBA players are not allowed in the building or on the team's web site during the current work stoppage. Pretty ridiculous. On the other hand, the open space means more room for pictures of Korbinian Holzer and Petter Granberg.

LEAFS STUFF (SORT OF)

Both Reimer and Ryan Miller played well on Friday night. Miller absolutely robbed Lupul late in the third period with a glove save and Reimer was big on a couple of breakaways ... A press box wag was lamenting the fact that the Leafs lost Christian Hanson this summer (signed by the Washington Capitals as an unrestricted free agent), because if he was still around, the Leafs would have Hanson 'und' Franson on the team, and that combination would certainly pump the Leafs up ... You haven't heard Rush's Tom Sawyer until you've heard it played on an arena organ.

GOOD AND NOT-SO-GOOD

The Good: Nazem Kadri, with excellent feeds all night. Phil Kessel, scored, but also some very clever passes, John-Michael Liles, Gardiner, Dion Phaneuf. Reimer.

Not so good: The Leafs power play.

No seventh heaven for Leafs

David Shoalts

The Globe and Mail

September 24, 2011

There may be no consensus yet about who will make the starting six when the NHL season opens but there is one about the quality of the latest group of Toronto Maple Leafs defencemen.

“I think it's the deepest and best group we've had since I've been here,” Leafs general manager Brian Burke said shortly before Friday's 2-1 preseason loss to the Buffalo Sabres.

Former Toronto Maple Leafs captain and last one to wear the original vintage jersey Darryl Sittler, right, shows off the Maple Leafs new third jersey with Wendel Clark, second right, Colby Armstrong, second left, and Luke Schenn, left, in Toronto on Friday, Sept. 23, 2011. THE CANADIAN PRESS/Nathan Denette

No one can argue that and there is precious little argument to be made over the first five jobs on the blueline. Dion Phaneuf, Keith Aulie, John-Michael Liles, Luke Schenn and Cody Franson are all guaranteed to be in the lineup on opening night, barring injury. The oldest of the group is the greybeard Liles, who is 30.

It is the choice between Carl Gunnarsson and Mike Komisarek that generates most of the discussion about the defence, although Franson plays a role here as well. Both Franson and Komisarek play the right side, so the coaching staff is thinking about switching Franson to the left, which might help Komisarek nail down the sixth spot at the expense of Gunnarsson.

The only trouble is, Franson, 24, played the left side for the first time this week in a preseason game against the Philadelphia Flyers. It was not fun.

“It felt awkward,” Franson said. “Everything takes a second longer.”

The switch may seem inconsequential to the fans but Franson said it's akin to teaching yourself to do everything left-handed.

“The way you naturally curl with the puck has to change playing the left side,” he said. “You've got to pull pucks in the offensive zone off the wall with your backhand instead of your forehand.

“Every little thing is so much different, like keeping your gaps in the neutral zone you have to pivot the other way than you're used to. The little things like that, people don't really realize they are big things to change. It will take some time to get used to.”

Nevertheless, Franson, who is in his first season as a Leaf after coming over in a trade with the Nashville Predators, will give it a try even if he would rather not.

The bigger question is who deserves a spot between Gunnarsson and Komisarek. The latter was almost a marginal member of the unit by the end of last season, as younger players like Gunnarsson, Schenn and Aulie played much better.

Most observers say Gunnarsson, 25, is having a better camp than Komisarek, 29, and that rookie Jake Gardiner may even be ahead of him. Head coach Ron Wilson was heard singing Gunnarsson's praises earlier this week.

But Komisarek has his backers among the Leaf braintrust. They like how he mentors the Leafs' large collection of young players and his positive attitude. Burke shakes his head at the suggestion Komisarek could be traded and said any team needs at least seven NHL-calibre defencemen to get through a season.

Wilson also dismissed any suggestion Komisarek has to worry about a job. "He's going to fit in on one of the pairs if he keeps playing the way he has," the coach said.

What may play a role in the end is which player management thinks will clear NHL waivers. Gunnarsson just signed a two-year contract and now must clear waivers if he is sent down to the farm team, just like the veteran Komisarek.

Gunnarsson counts for \$1.325-million (all currency U.S.) against the salary cap compared to Komisarek's \$4.5-million in each of the next three years. Komisarek, by the way, does not have a no-trade or no-move clause in his contract. At the start of each season he is required to give the Leafs a list of at least 10 NHL teams to which he would accept a trade but he cannot block a move to one of them.

The Moneypuck revolution

James Mirtle

The Globe and Mail

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It's a revolution that has, in many ways, already taken place in North America's other top professional sports.

In baseball, Bill James, Billy Beane and Moneyball – the film version of which was released in theatres this weekend and stars Brad Pitt as Beane – helped bring in-depth statistical analysis out into the open to the point that it's now simply part of doing business for most teams.

In the NBA, the Houston Rockets turned to former MIT analytics professor Daryl Morey to be their general manager, one of more and more hires in that vein in the basketball world.

And in the NFL, teams such as the New England Patriots have long used advanced statistics to dig up the best players for the lowest price, giving them an advantage under the salary cap.

Hockey, however, has always been behind the curve.

Which is where people like Gabriel Desjardins are coming in.

With a day job as an engineer with a semiconductor firm in Silicon Valley, Desjardins's background is unlike anyone's in hockey. But with teams looking for a unique edge, he's being called upon regularly when NHL teams have a decision to make.

While his name isn't listed on any team's directory, the 34-year-old, originally from Winnipeg, is now on the payroll of three teams as part of a new push for more statistical analysis in the league.

More than 30 years after James made a name for himself as baseball's leading numbers guru, Desjardins has built a reputation that will likely see him catch with a team full time – just as James did as a senior adviser with the Boston Red Sox in 2003.

It seems only fitting that Desjardins grew up reading James's work and began applying it to the NHL about a decade ago.

“He's somebody who changed my thinking about baseball,” Desjardins said. “And ultimately he made me change my thinking about hockey, even though he doesn't know anything about hockey.”

In some cases, that meant borrowing directly from James, such as when Desjardins used his “minor league equivalencies” concept to project how goals and assists in junior or minor pro leagues translate to the NHL.

In others, Desjardins developed completely new statistics specifically for hockey, including ratings for the quality of players' teammates and opponents when they're on the ice.

Other metrics, such as Corsi – which was originally used by Buffalo Sabres goaltending coach Jim Corsi to measure the workload netminders were facing – gauge how often players are in possession of the puck by counting every shot directed at either net (including those that miss the net or are blocked) while they're on the ice.

In contrast to traditional statistics such as goals and assists, advanced statisticians believe these new numbers offer greater insight into which players are performing well in important areas of the game, including defensive play, puck possession and ability to play against other team's top lines.

This knowledge, in theory, allows teams to better determine what players should be paid – that is, their true value under the salary cap – and find players who may be overlooked or underrated by their own organizations.

Desjardins's work at behindthenet.ca has gained a large following in the past several years, but NHL teams have only recently begun to reach out to him for help. At a cost of up to \$200 an hour, he now dedicates roughly eight hours a week during the season to the endeavour.

Which teams he works for and what, precisely, he does for them, however, remains behind closed doors, as he's sworn to confidentiality as teams try to keep quiet any work they do in what is very new territory for the league.

What Desjardins can say is that some of his recommendations led directly to teams pulling the trigger on major deals last season.

"I've seen people use Corsi to make trades," he said. "I'll put it that way."

The secrecy surrounding analytics in the NHL extends well beyond Desjardins.

Of all the teams contacted on the subject, only the Pittsburgh Penguins were willing to talk openly about their increasing use of advanced statistics, which began in earnest last year through a partnership with a group called The Sports Analytics Institute.

"This was the first year, this past season, that I felt we were really onto something," said Penguins director of player personnel Dan MacKinnon, who has become the team's point man in the area. "We're getting some powerful insight into things that you just can't track with the naked eye or traditional statistics."

MacKinnon estimates that only five or six NHL teams are doing considerable work with analytics, with another half dozen beginning to "kick tires" and investigate some of the concepts involved.

The rest of the league, he said, isn't going this route because "they feel hockey doesn't lend itself to analytics."

MacKinnon pointed to the Sabres' recent creation of a small analytics department as a sign of where things are going, adding that he wouldn't be surprised if more and more people like Desjardins are brought into the fold to offer a different perspective.

SAI's model has introduced the Penguins to in-depth shot location analysis and goal scoring probabilities – using a statistic called predicted goals scored – that they make available after every NHL game.

What was initially a tough sell (and remains one to many teams) has become a tool some on Pittsburgh's staff use on a daily basis.

"Instead of explaining it to people, we put it right in front of them," said Kevin Mongeon, an economics professor who developed SAI's metrics with analytics specialist Mike Boyle. "And said, 'Here it is.' They looked at it, and there's a little bit of variation game over game, but after 10 games, they went, 'Holy crap, I can't believe I've been doing my job without this.'

"The coach in Pittsburgh, we went down after a game one time, and he said 'Did we out PGS them?' They used it as a verb after a while. But it took a while to get there."

Desjardins met that resistance firsthand when he began meeting with teams, recalling one recent sit-down with an NHL general manager who wrote off his work as merely "doing arithmetic."

He believes most teams still have a long way to go in terms of embracing what advanced statistics can do for their organizations.

“You can see that there are a lot of decisions made every year – Philadelphia getting [Ilya] Bryzgalov, for one – that pretty much any analytics department would, 100 per cent, advise you against,” Desjardins said, referencing the Flyers netminder's \$51-million contract as an example of inefficient spending.

“As high as player salaries are, if you hired a very skilled analytical consultant from industry, paid them \$150,000 to \$200,000 a year, and he sits there and works on things all year and comes up with recommendations, what are the odds that he's not going to be able to find you a player that you can sign for \$200,000 less his value or less than you otherwise would have paid?”

“It's pretty obvious that there's some value in there.”

MacKinnon agrees and sees that as the way things will be done in the future as the NHL finally follows in the footsteps of other major pro leagues.

He hopes that by shedding light on what the Penguins are doing more teams will get on board and the data available will improve.

“There's no doubt in my mind,” MacKinnon said. “Ten years from now, every team will be using something like this.”

“For me to make the best recommendation possible to [Penguins general manager Ray Shero], I'm using this as a powerful tool and he's asking what it's told me.”

Why haven't advanced stats caught on in the NHL?

James Mirtle

The Globe and Mail

September 24, 2011

There are plenty of theories out there as to why hockey has been so slow to embrace advanced analytics the way other sports have in recent years.

The Globe and Mail asked four statistically minded people working in the NHL, either as employees or independent analysts, for their opinion as to why it's taken so long for the trend to emerge in front offices around the league.

BEHIND THE TIMES

One of the more common theories is that NHL teams are very traditional organizations, with teams often run by large groups of former players and in much the same way they've been for decades.

"They've all grown up without these types of numbers and have to relearn the way they think about statistics," said one staffer on a Western Conference team that is beginning to dabble in advanced statistics.

"I think what's standing in the way of things fundamentally changing in the NHL is the backgrounds of guys who are general managers," statistician Gabriel Desjardins added. "I think something like 20 of them played in the NHL. Just by its very nature, that's not going to bring a lot of new ideas into the process."

TOO HARD TO MEASURE

Others point to the complexity of the sport, with so many shift changes, different numbers of players on the ice in different situations and even randomness (or luck) factoring into every game.

"Hockey's very complex," acknowledged Kevin Mongeon, an economics professor at the University of New Haven who founded the Sports Analytics Institute with data analyst Mike Boyle. "In order to extract information that is usable on a regular basis and teams can actually make actions on it, it takes a very high, sophisticated level of analysis to be done on it.

"It's not as simple as baseball, therefore it takes more of an investment of effort and time for the teams. That has held it back."

Mongeon also believes there's also a lot of confusion among teams as to where to go for analysis.

Combined with an unwillingness to invest resources into what's a relatively new field, that helps explain why so many teams have ignored the area entirely.

"Some teams want to use analytics, but they don't know specifically what that means," he said. "There's a problem in the market with what is a good analytics service to buy.

"Teams aren't for all intents and purposes investing in major statistical groups to build that intellectual capital [the way they have in other sports] ... They don't have that intermediate person inside the organization. And they're not really willing to pay for it. But they're becoming more willing to pay for it."

Also, statistics that are perceived to be the most useful can rapidly change, something that causes confusion as to which analytics are the best for teams to turn to.

"The signal-to-noise also hurts with adoption of the newer numbers in that the perspectives can be overwhelming," the Western Conference staffer said. "And it creates an uncertain landscape."

“A few years ago we had [statistician] Alan Ryder’s work, then everyone jumped on the Corsi bandwagon and the online community keeps chipping away at that. You don’t want to invest in a system if it won’t be the standard two years from now.”

A NEW FRONTIER

Some of those working for NHL teams, however, argue that the quality of analysis is only now getting to the point to be really useful.

“It’s not that everyone’s been blind to this stuff forever,” said Pittsburgh Penguins director of player development Dan MacKinnon, who used SAI’s metrics extensively last season and was one of the members on the first hockey panel at MIT’s Sports Analytics Conference this year. “It’s more that, it hasn’t been available until fairly recently. The NHL didn’t even track this kind of [advanced data] until 2006 or 2007.”

Other than the Penguins, MacKinnon points to the Boston Bruins, Buffalo Sabres, Calgary Flames and Tampa Bay Lightning as teams that have begun to invest in this type of analysis.

Many of those in front offices looking at analytics are also from a younger generation, one that grew up reading about Bill James, Moneyball and some of the advanced analysis being done in other sports.

“Honestly, probably the greatest obstacle in sport is that it’s hard to strip away all the emotion and make completely rational decisions,” MacKinnon said. “That’s exactly what analytics is trying to do.

“The reason why we don’t mind being a little open about [what we’re doing] is we’re hoping to take this to the next level where we can get this data from the other leagues [like the AHL]. It’s going to take a larger community than just the Penguins to do it. If we get more teams asking for it, I think we can get that.”