



Buffalo Sabres

Daily Press Clips

October 25, 2011

Sabres aim to get first goal

Early score would help stop Tampa tactics

Miguel Rodriguez

The Buffalo News

October 25, 2011

Was Saturday night the start of a new trend in the Buffalo Sabres-Tampa Bay Lightning series or was it the exception to an existing one?

The Sabres are hoping for the latter, but it's a question they and the rest of Sabreland won't really know the answer to until later tonight once the two Eastern Conference rivals conclude their first-ever home-and-home series at First Niagara Center.

Recent history shows the Sabres usually find a way to zap the Bolts often on the scoreboard. Yet on Saturday night in St. Pete Times Forum, Tampa Bay -- which until last Thursday had trouble keeping shots down and the puck out of its own net -- found a way to blanket Buffalo's offensive game with its 1-3-1 defensive scheme in taking the 3-0 decision.

That's the first time since the 1998-99 season that either team has recorded a shutout in the season series. It's something Buffalo doesn't want to happen again, and the Sabres believe they know the solution to the 1-3-1 labyrinth.

Draw first blood.

"I think we've got to get the lead," said Sabres coach Lindy Ruff after Monday's practice at First Niagara Center. "If you get the lead, it pulls them out of what they want to try to do. We had early chances that could've got us on the board and didn't finish.

"When they got the lead, it allowed them to hunker down even a little harder but it's a lot of what you see in the league now. We're going to have to battle for those second opportunities. We had some really good zone time that I feel we didn't generate enough quality. We fanned on a couple shots. There were a few situations where I didn't feel we were hard enough on pucks around the net."

Since the lockout, that has been the exception for the Sabres against Tampa Bay. Buffalo has scored at least four goals a game in 16 of the teams' 25 meetings, averaging 4.04 goals per in that stretch.

The totals include a pair of thrillers from last year -- the 7-4 comeback in Tampa Bay, a contest in which Drew Stafford recorded a hat trick, and last April's 4-2 triumph where Thomas Vanek rocked First Niagara Center, and the Lightning, with a three-goal performance of his own.

There were also Buffalo wins by scores of 7-1 and 6-2 during the 2009-10 season.

"I think we just have to be a little more simpler and take care of the puck," said Vanek, who has 22 goals and 29 points in 25 games versus Tampa. "They protect their goalie well. We just have to win puck more battles, get it deep and create chances."

Ruff said after Saturday's loss, the Sabres could have been harder on the puck -- especially on the power play as Buffalo failed to score on its three chances with the man advantage.

"They outbattled us, we've seen it in video that they out-competed us and that we didn't work hard enough," Sabres winger Nathan Gerbe said. "If we get beat by a better team that's just the way it is, but when you get beat from being outworked, that's hard to swallow. I think as a team we have to compete and comeback harder."

The Sabres' power play may sport a different look tonight as forward Brad Boyes practiced with the top unit of Vanek, Jason Pominville, Christian Ehrhoff and Marc-Andre Gagnani on Monday.

"Our plan is to try to use him on that unit, get a little bit different look," Ruff said. "It's early, we'd like to try a couple different looks. He can pound the puck. If we can get him in situations where he can pound the puck we can utilize his tools a little more effectively."

"This is my opportunity to get a good look and produce offensively," said Boyes, a former 40-goal scorer who has just one assist this year and five goals in his 28-game Sabres career. "I'm an offensive guy who hasn't gotten it going yet. Maybe some time on the power play will get it going."

Saturday's shutout was just the seventh in a series that dates to the 1992-93 season and just the third by Tampa Bay.

The Lightning have been playing better defensively since Guy Boucher took over as coach prior to the 2010-11 season, yet the blanking still was quite unexpected considering their 3-3-2 start. Last year's Eastern Conference finalist had been giving up an average of 37.16 shots per game prior to consecutive triumphs over the Islanders (4-1) and Sabres. In those wins, the Lightning limited the teams to a combined 38 shots -- including 21 by the Sabres which is their season low. Goalie Mathieu Garon earned the win in both those games for Tampa.

"For the most part I thought we were pretty effective going through [their 1-3-1 Saturday]," Ruff said. "We played it pretty well for the first 40 [minutes]. We kind of let it slip away. It's built to create turnovers. If you get a little pigheaded and don't want to dump the puck in at times, it poses a problem."

"I think against a system like that, it's not that they trap much," Vanek said. "If you crack them first ... that will open up ice."

Ennis injury kicks off line changes

Miguel Rodriguez
The Buffalo News
October 25, 2011

Tyler Ennis had a Samson-like moment Saturday and it'll be a spell before he's healthy enough to be a difference-maker in the Buffalo Sabres' lineup.

The left winger, who scored 20 goals as a rookie last year, will be sidelined with an ankle injury. He suffered the sprain early in Saturday night's loss at Tampa Bay when he slid hard into the goal after being tapped from behind by Ryan Malone while driving to the net. Ennis' left foot landed flush on the post leading to an injury coach Lindy Ruff said will keep him sidelined "week to week."

When asked if it was a high ankle sprain, Ruff said: "It's an ankle sprain, so it'll be a bit of time [before he returns]. ... We'll just have to wait and see."

Ennis wasn't available for comment.

Ennis has no points this season, a seven-game slump that prompted the 5-foot-9, 157-pound 22-year-old to make the drastic decision to shed his signature locks for a more respectable hair-do last Friday.

Ennis played all 82 games last year and finished as the Sabres' fourth-leading scorer with 49 points.

He provided a boost during the postseason in 2010 as a late-season callup with his speed and playmaking ability, sharing the team lead with four points in a six-game loss to the Bruins. He had two goals and four points in last year's seven-game first-round loss to the Flyers.

"I'm not sure how long he'll be out but he's a good player and guys have got to step up around him, try to fill that role," winger Nathan Gerbe said. "Everybody has to step up as a team."

"[We'll] make adjustments," Ruff said. "We have some pieces we're going to switch around. There are guys who can fit into that role. Ville [Leino] can move over [from center to left wing]. We're going to try different things."

Leino skated on the left wing Monday with center Derek Roy and right winger Drew Stafford.

"Actually, Ville had mentioned that he'd like to go to the wing, so it's funny how it works," said Ruff of the team's offseason acquisition. "You'd like to find a line and keep them together, that would be the thing that you would hope most. I'd like to see Roy, Leino and Stafford play together for a while and gain some chemistry. I think that's the most important part. It isn't position to position, it's leaving three individuals together for a while, and they develop some chemistry."

* * * *

Another solution could be shifting Jochen Hecht into Ennis' spot. However, that's a decision that won't be revealed until today. Hecht has been trying to recover from a concussion and the Sabres have been taking a cautious approach toward re-inserting the veteran with a history of head injuries into the lineup. All the pertinent parties were expected to gather late Monday to formulate a decision.

Hecht practiced on a line with Brad Boyes and Cody McCormick on Monday but said afterwards he was just filling in for the absent Ennis and Paul Gaustad, who received a maintenance day.

"I'm moving in the right direction," Hecht said. "I'm getting better. I had a good week last week. I just have to hope things keep progressing to the point where I feel 100 percent comfortable to go out there.

"It would be nice to get in there [with the team short-handed], but I have to look at the big picture. I want to come back for the rest of the year not a game here or a game there and battle this the whole year."

Although he doesn't know the exact number of days, Hecht said it's been a while since he's had his last concussion symptom.

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The chance of receiving playing time on the power play wasn't the only reason forward Brad Boyes was feeling pretty good Monday. The veteran reached a career milestone last Saturday and will hit another one tonight against Tampa Bay in First Niagara Center.

Boyes played his 500th career game Saturday in the 3-0 loss. In an odd twist, he will be playing his 500th straight NHL game tonight.

Confused? Don't be.

Boyes suited up for one game during the 2003-04 season, making his NHL debut with the San Jose Sharks two days before being included in a three-team trade that saw him get shipped to Boston. He went from NHL to AHL after the deal. He also played all of 2004-05 in Providence during the NHL lockout before starting his consecutive games streak Oct. 5, 2005.

"It's weird because even between that part I didn't miss an NHL game but I guess I did miss games because I was in the minors," Boyes said of the unique back-to-back milestones.

"I'm pretty proud of that. ... The biggest thing is you want to play every game and knock on wood, I've been lucky to be able to do that so far. I want to be able to continue to do that. I got my 500th [NHL game] in Tampa and didn't get the right result. The consecutive [streak], hopefully we get a win."

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Hall of Famer Brett Hull probably won't ever be a fan favorite in these parts, what with his role in "No Goal" during Game Six of the 1999 Stanley Cup finals.

He likely won't be making any friends in these parts anytime soon since he recently brought up that painful memory with his newly created Twitter account (2ndBestHull).

Hull, the son of Hall of Famer Bobby Hull, recently had an avatar (Twitter-account mug shot) with a Brett Hull is a Cheater T-shirt created by Born in Buffalo, a company owned by Dave Hassett.

Included was the following tweet: "New pic for all my friends in buffalo xoxo."

He has since changed his avatar photo.

Sabres seek to salvage split with Lightning

Eric Goodman

NHL.com

October 24, 2011

LIGHTNING (3-3-2) at SABRES (5-2-0)

TV: VERSUS (HD), TSN2

Season series: The Lightning took the first of four meetings this season with a 3-0 win at home this past Saturday. Goalie [Mathieu Garon](#) earned his first shutout as a member of the Lightning with 21 saves against Buffalo.

Big Story: In the back end of a home-and-home series, the Bolts look to extend their winning streak to three games, while Buffalo hopes to catch another spark after Saturday's loss ended a string of three straight victories. The Sabres will also seek to rediscover their recent winning formula against the Bolts, having gone 15-5-0 combined over the past five seasons.

Team Scope:

Lightning: Tampa Bay appears to be back on track, having won two in a row following a season-high five-game losing streak. While Garon has been great in wins over Buffalo and the New York Islanders, part of the reason for the recent turnaround is a return to an overall disciplined style of play. After killing off the first 22 penalties over its first four games of the season, Tampa went on to surrender seven power-play goals in two consecutive losses to the Panthers last week. In the wins over the Sabres and Islanders, the Lightning killed off all four penalties.

Garon looked sharp in Saturday's shutout of Buffalo, but the veteran goalie was aware that his supporting cast chipped in considerably. The Bolts had 22 blocked shots, while Garon made 21 total saves.

"The defense in front of me was outstanding all game," Garon said. "I think they made more blocks than I did."

Sabres: Tuesday's meeting with Tampa Bay marks the first of five straight home games for Buffalo. Perennial All-Star goalie [Ryan Miller](#) will try to get back on the winning side of things following Saturday's road loss. The U.S.-born netminder was victorious in four of his last five starts entering Saturday's game.

While the box score showed a relatively close game with a 3-0 final and Tampa leading in shots by a slim 26-21 margin, the game action told a different story with the Lightning showing more hustle and grit.

"We didn't win the battles, and that's why we lost the game," forward [Ville Leino](#) said.

Who's Hot: Garon has been a big part of the Bolts' improved play, winning two straight starts and

allowing a single goal over that span. ... Sabres forward Tomas Vanek had a then season-long six-game points streak ended at Tampa on Saturday. The Austrian All-Star has been great against the Lightning in his career, amassing 22 goals over 25 games played.

Injury Report: For Tampa Bay, defenseman [Mattias Ohlund](#) is out indefinitely following surgery to both knees last week. ... [Jochen Hecht](#) remains sidelined for Buffalo with a concussion, while [Tyler Ennis](#) suffered an ankle injury Saturday and is out indefinitely.

Stat Pack: The Lightning lead the NHL with 136 blocked shots this season.

Puck Drop: Lightning coach Guy Boucher had not yet confirmed if he was going to return to Garon on Tuesday or give veteran [Dwayne Roloson](#) (1-2-1 with a 5.09 goals-against average this season) another shot. While Garon has certainly showed the hot hand of late, the experienced goalie isn't getting too far ahead of himself.

"I don't play for shutouts," Garon told the Lightning's official website following Saturday's victory. "A win is a win, though, and we got it tonight."

Tampa Bay (3-3-2) at Buffalo (5-2-0)

Noey Kupchan

STATS

October 25, 2011

The [Buffalo Sabres](#) started their four-game road trip with three consecutive wins before losing the finale to the [Tampa Bay Lightning](#).

They didn't have to wait long for an opportunity to exact revenge.

Playing at First Niagara Center for just the second time this season, Buffalo looks to continue its home domination of Tampa Bay as the teams conclude a home-and-home set Tuesday night.

The Sabres (5-2-0), who outscored opponents 9-3 during the first three stops on their trek, couldn't get any of their 21 shots past [Mathieu Garon](#) in a 3-0 loss to the Lightning on Saturday.

"It's one of those nights where we didn't deserve the points, and we didn't get them because we didn't create enough," captain [Jason Pominville](#) said.

After opening their season with a pair of wins in Europe, the Sabres suffered a 4-3 home-opening loss to Carolina on Oct. 14 before heading out on the road.

"We really got away from our game the last home game, and we talked about that in (Monday's) meeting," coach Lindy Ruff told the Sabres' official website. "We need to be the team that wins the majority of the puck battles, and establish that this is going to be an awful tough building to come in to."

The Lightning (3-3-2) surely haven't enjoyed too many of their recent visits to Buffalo, where the Sabres have gone 20-6-0 with one tie in the last 27 meetings in this series.

While Tampa Bay coach Guy Boucher was more than pleased with his team's result Saturday, he knows that sweeping this two-game set won't be easy.

"I still believe they're top-three in the league, I really do," he said. "They're outstanding out there. Goaltender's great, defense is extremely solid now and I've always liked the way their forwards play. We're gonna stay humble here, we're playing them next and they're a hockey machine and we're gonna have to be really prepared for (Tuesday)."

The Sabres, however, won't be at full strength after learning left wing [Tyler Ennis](#) - a 20-goal scorer last season - is week-to-week after spraining his left ankle Saturday. Despite failing to register a point in seven games in 2010-11, his presence will surely be missed.

"We'll make the adjustments. We've got some pieces that we're going to switch around," Ruff said. "There's guys that can obviously go into that role; Ville (Leino) can go over to the left side. We're going to try some different things."

Leino and the Sabres offense could struggle to get going against Garon, who has earned a third consecutive start with two straight excellent performances.

After making 16 saves in Thursday's 4-1 win over the [New York Islanders](#), Garon recorded his 20th career shutout Saturday. He had gone 0-6-0 with a 4.05 goals-against average in his previous six career starts versus Buffalo.

"I don't play for shutouts," he said. "It doesn't matter if we get a shutout. All I want is a win, and we got it."

Buffalo's [Ryan Miller](#), who has allowed two goals or fewer - posting three shutouts - in nine of his last 11 regular-season starts dating to 2010-11, is 17-5-0 lifetime against the Lightning. He's won seven of nine career home contests in this series despite a lackluster 3.11 GAA.

Though he was blanked by Garon on Saturday, Buffalo's [Thomas Vanek](#) has five goals and an assist in his last three games against Tampa Bay. He has 16 goals - three hat tricks - in 12 career home games versus the Lightning.

ENNIS WILL MISS TIME WITH ANKLE SPRAIN

Kevin Snow

Sabres.com

October 24, 2011

Tyler Ennis has become Buffalo's first injury casualty of the season, suffering an ankle sprain on Saturday in Tampa Bay that has him listed as "week-to-week" according to head coach Lindy Ruff.

Ennis was injured just 2:15 into the game when he fell awkwardly into the net after being given a push from behind by Tampa's Ryan Malone while driving to the Lightning goal. The second-year winger, who had been held without a point so far this season, attempted to skate on the ankle during a TV timeout before shutting it down for the night.

Ruff said that he's already got a plan in place to replace Ennis, who scored 20 goals for the Sabres in rookie season in 2010-11

"We'll make the adjustments. We've got some pieces that we're going to switch around. There's guys that can obviously go into that role; Ville (Leino) can go over to the left side. We're going to try some different things."

The plan already appears to be taking shape, as Leino skated in Ennis' spot on the left wing alongside Drew Stafford and Derek Roy during today's practice at First Niagara Center.

"Actually, Ville had mentioned that he'd like to go to the wing, so it's funny how it works," explained Ruff. "You'd like to find a line and keep them together, that would be the thing that you would hope most. I'd like to see Roy, Leino and Stafford play together for a while and gain some chemistry. I think that's the most important part. It isn't position to position, it's leaving three individuals together for a while and they develop some chemistry."

Tuesday's game against Tampa Bay will be just the Sabres' second home game at First Niagara Center this season, and it also kicks off a stretch that will see them play seven of their next nine games at home. Ruff says it's imperative they use this stretch of games to assert themselves as a difficult team to face at home.

"We really got away from our game the last home game, and we talked about that in this morning's meeting. We need to be the team that wins the majority of the puck battles, and establish that this is going to be an awful tough building to come in to."

Paul Gaustad also missed practice for the second time in four days, but Ruff said it was nothing more than a "maintenance day" to rest a pulled muscle.

Jochen Hecht skated on a line with Cody McCormick and Brad Boyes during practice, however Ruff was skeptical of his chances to be inserted in the lineup tomorrow for the first time this season.

“We’ll find out more today with Jochen as to whether he can play or not,” said Ruff. “Initially, I would say no.”

Leino back on the wing for Sabres

Bill Hoppe

Niagara Gazette

October 25, 2011

BUFFALO — Ville Leino's transition to the Sabres has admittedly been a bit overwhelming.

The Finn's spent five weeks acclimating himself to a new position, team and system while trying to live up to the expectations that accompany his surprising six-year, \$27 million contract.

So far, Leino has only one goal and two points, not the kind of numbers the Sabres expected when they nabbed the 28-year-old early in free agency.

Back on July 1, the Sabres signed Leino to be a top center, a move that raised some eyebrows since he had spent his entire NHL career as a winger. But Leino, a pivot in Europe, wanted another crack in the middle.

Just seven games into the season, he's already back on the wing, a change Sabres coach Lindy Ruff said Leino mentioned he'd like. He should skate on the left side with Derek Roy and Drew Stafford when the Sabres host the Tampa Bay Lightning tonight at the First Niagara Center.

Don't read too much into Leino's brief Sabres career, though, Ruff cautioned. He knew Leino would need an adjustment period.

"I've always said it takes time," Ruff said Monday. "There's a lot of examples of players that step in and initially it's tough. He's done some good things. Obviously, he's been uncomfortable in some situations. But I like what he's done so far. I'd like him to have better numbers but he doesn't."

For Leino, playing the wing again will allow him to think less and play more naturally, something he hasn't been able to do while searching for some comfort with the Sabres.

"There's so much new and you're trying to get used to everything, especially playing center and linemates would change and stuff like that," said Leino, who played only 9:40 last week in Montreal. "You're kind of trying to focus on things, and there's another new thing in there."

"It's easier when hockey comes to you. You play, you're natural, you play on your instincts — that's how I've played, that's how I've always played. I can't be thinking there too much."

Playing center made Leino, a strong puck handler, lose some of his aggressiveness.

"A lot of the times when you wanted to go you were kind of thinking you're not supposed to go," Leino said. "You just want to play it safe and be on the defensive side. I think I played pretty solid defensively, but offense, that's actually my game."

That's certainly true. In 2010, Leino had seven goals and 21 points in 19 games during Philadelphia's run to the Stanley Cup final. Last season, his first as an NHL regular, he had 19 goals and 53 points. He accumulated most of his points with the Flyers on the right wing with Daniel Briere and Scott Hartnell.

Two things made putting Leino on the wing easy. Rookie Luke Adam, a bubble player during training camp, has emerged as a top center, compiling three goals and six points already. Then, winger Tyler Ennis sprained his ankle early Saturday in a 3-0 loss in Tampa Bay. Leino took his spot with Roy and Stafford after that. Ennis is "week-to-week," Ruff said.

Now, Ruff hopes the new trio stays together.

"That would be the thing you hope the most, that Roy and Leino and Stafford could stay together and develop a little bit of chemistry," Ruff said. "I think that's the most important part. It isn't position-to-position. I think it's leaving three individuals together for a while, and they develop chemistry and play well together."

Leino, who spent most of this season centering Ennis and Brad Boyes, is intrigued by the new line.

"(Stafford) is a great goal scorer," he said. "Derek makes a lot of plays. So I think it's going to be a lot of fun. We played pretty good last game. We just want to create and make stuff happen out there."

Leino's confident he's starting to adapt to his new surroundings.

"I'm getting to know the players a little better; the players are getting to know me, what I do, my tendencies on the ice," he said. "I feel a lot better. We'll try to move on here."

...

Boyes will play his 500th consecutive game tonight. Incredibly, the 29-year-old's never missed an NHL game. His ironman streak ranks third behind Calgary's Jay Bouwmeester and Vancouver's Henrik Sedin.

"In today's game it is (impressive), that you're able to put that many games together," Ruff said. "With the size of the players and the amount of games you play, short days where you play four in a week and stuff, it's hard to put a string like that together."

Boyes, who hasn't scored this season, should play down low on the power play tonight.

"He can pound the puck, and I think if we can get him in situations where he can pound it, we can utilize his tools a little bit more effectively," Ruff said.

NOTES: Ruff said backup goalie Jhonas Enroth will start this week. The Sabres also play at home Thursday and Saturday. Ruff had planned to give the rookie his second nod last week, but Ryan Miller was too hot to rest. ... Center Paul Gaustad (muscle pull) sat practice for a maintenance day, Ruff said. He should play tonight. ... Tonight starts a five-game homestand

Bolts and Sabres wrap up home-and-home

Peter Pupello

Lightning.com

October 25, 2011

TV/RADIO: VERSUS; AM 970 WFLA

Season Series: It's the second of four meetings on the year and the back end of a home and home series between the clubs. The Lightning and Sabres squared off in the first matchup of the season just three days ago at the St. Pete Times Forum where Tampa Bay earned a 3-0 shutout over Buffalo.

The Big Story: After losing five of the first six, Tampa Bay has now won two straight and heads into the HSBC Arena seeking to take two in a row from the Sabres. On Saturday, goaltender [Mathieu Garon](#) backstopped the Bolts to a 3-0 whitewash of the Sabres with a 21-save effort. He'll get the call again in net after allowing just one goal in his previous two combined outings.

Team Scope:

LIGHTNING - Tampa Bay plays the first match of a two-game road swing that concludes in Nashville on Thursday night. Tampa Bay enters the bout with Buffalo coming off consecutive wins for the first time all season. The recent success has been in large part due to the play of the team's defensemen, who have just about done it all lately by providing both offense and defense in equal parts. On Saturday night, [Pavel Kubina](#) and [Victor Hedman](#) took care of the scoring, while [Brett Clark](#) extended his NHL-leading blocked shot total to 28 and [Mathieu Garon](#) stopped all 21 shots against to record his 20th career shutout. [Martin St. Louis](#) also added a goal. Tampa Bay has outscored its opponents 7-1 in its previous pair of outings, while limiting them to an average of just 19 shots on goal, exemplifying the "defense first" mentality that head coach Guy Boucher has been preaching.

SABRES – Following a two-game road trip through the state of Florida over the weekend, Buffalo returns home to take on the Lightning as it opens up a five-game home stand. On Saturday, the Sabres became the second consecutive victim to have a three-game win streak disrupted by Tampa Bay after the Lightning also snapped the New York Islanders' stretch of three straight victories just two nights prior. Ryan Miller allowed two goals on 25 shots while the Sabres' inability to score a single goal proved uncharacteristic for a team that had delivered at least three goals in each of its six games on the season. The Sabres are not only looking to rediscover their offense which was absent in the most recent meeting, but also for its first win at home after dropping the only contest so far at the HSBC Arena, 4-3, to Carolina back on Oct. 14.

Who's Hot: [Vincent Lecavalier](#), [Steven Stamkos](#) and [Teddy Purcell](#) each come in riding three-game point streaks, while goaltender [Mathieu Garon](#) has allowed just a single goal in his last 120 minutes. Garon's 1.51 goals-against average ranks fourth among all NHL net minders who have appeared in at least three games this season. Buffalo's Thomas Vanek was held off the scoresheet on Saturday, but already comes in with six goals and 10 points on the year through his

team's first seven games. He has also had success against the Lightning throughout his career, scoring 22 goals – including three hat tricks – in 25 games.

Injury Report: LIGHTNING - [Mattias Ohlund](#) (knee, placed on Injured Reserve). SABRES – Jochen Hecht (concussion) and Tyler Myers (ankle, out indefinitely).

Notable Quotable: “We won this past game 3-0 so they’re going to be coming at us looking for revenge. They’re probably not happy about that so we have to be ready for them. They’re a very tough team to play, especially in their barn, but at the same time it’s exciting to play that team too.” – Lightning defenseman [Victor Hedman](#), on the challenge of playing the Sabres in consecutive games

Tampa Bay Lightning defenseman Marc-Andre Bergeron contributes heavily on the offensive end

Damian Cristodero

St. Petersburg Times

October 24, 2011

TAMPA — Marc-Andre Bergeron's five-game points streak ended Saturday in the Lightning's 3-0 victory over the Sabres. He didn't even get a shot on goal.

But the Tampa Bay defenseman didn't seem to mind.

"Absolutely not," Bergeron said at the St. Pete Times Forum. "This is a team game."

But there still is room to acknowledge personal accomplishment, and no Lightning player has done more this season, relative to last season, than Bergeron.

He has a team-best nine points on two goals and seven assists, and after eight games he already is one point ahead of his total for the 23 games he played in 2010-11 after signing in January as a free agent.

He is tied among defensemen for the league lead in points, tied for 10th in the league overall and is averaging 18:47 of ice time, his most since the 19:07 he averaged in 2006-07 with the Oilers and Islanders.

"It's obviously a surprise," Bergeron said of his offensive outburst. "It's not something you expect or are focusing on."

"He's just playing with confidence," fellow defenseman Victor Hedman said. "He makes plays out there. He's poised with the puck, and he has one of the best shots in the league."

Bergeron, 31, always has been an exceptional offensive player.

In 2000-01, he had 42 goals and 101 points in 69 games for Shawinigan of the junior Quebec league. He has 79 goals (43 on the power play) and 211 points in 430 NHL games, and in 2009-10 he had 13 goals and 34 points in 60 games for the Canadiens before a crushing injury to his right knee ended his season and required reconstructive surgery.

Bergeron spent the summer of 2010 rehabbing and wasn't cleared to practice until December, so it wasn't surprising he struggled after signing.

Spending last summer in the gym gave him a foundation for this season's success, he said, and signing a new two-year deal in June gave him peace of mind.

Bergeron also received a commitment from coach Guy Boucher the team would work with him to improve his defense, which still is a work in progress (he is minus-1) but miles ahead of where he was last season.

Always a battler, Bergeron, 5 feet 9, 198 pounds, is more diligent about closing gaps on puck-carriers and is better picking his spots to engage offensively. That not only keeps him in better defensive position, it puts him in situations in the attacking zone with a higher chance of success.

"Consistency in doing simple plays" is what Boucher said he wants from Bergeron, "to wait for opportunities rather than trying to force them."

"I've talked with Guy quite a bit," Bergeron said. "He made me understand that there are things I need to do, and by doing those things, it's going to give the coaches confidence in me. I'm just trying to keep it simple and not force the play too much."

Ultimately, though, Bergeron is a points producer with a shot that can make you say "Wow."

"Points are something, but it doesn't always tell if you're playing good or bad," Bergeron said. "Some games you don't get anything and you're actually playing really well."

Still, he added, "It's better than being minus-15 with zero points."

Clock ticking on Connolly decision

Erik Erlendsson

Tampa Tribune

October 24, 2011

BUFFALO, N.Y. -- Decision day looms for Lightning rookie Brett Connolly, and that has many asking: Should he stay or should he go?

The sixth overall pick in the 2010 draft will play in his ninth game of the season tonight as Tampa Bay opens a two-game trip at Buffalo. After that, the Lightning must decide if the 19-year-old is ready to stay with the big club for the remainder of the season or send him back to his junior team, Prince George of the Western Hockey League.

Once Connolly plays a 10th game — whenever that is — the clock starts ticking on the three-year entry-level deal he signed in July. He could still be reassigned to junior at any point after the 10th game.

On paper, it seems like a black-and-white decision. His play since arriving for rookie camp in early September has steadily improved and each time the coaching staff has thrown something at Connolly, he has shown he can handle it.

Preseason game? No problem. Preseason game playing on a line with Steven Stamkos and Marty St. Louis? Connolly fit right in. Regular-season game? Check. Playing regular-season games on one of the top two lines? Handled it.

But there are plenty of gray areas to consider. First and foremost is trying to project whether Connolly — who missed nearly an entire season two years ago because of hip injuries — is ready to maintain what he has done throughout a six-month NHL schedule of playing games every other night.

"Every day we pile on the pluses and the minuses concerning his future and concerning our future and there has to be somewhere in there, something that tells us that both can be combined for this year for us to keep him," Lightning coach Guy Boucher said. "Up to now he has shown us enough stuff that he can play with the better offensive players on our team."

Coaches often look to see if a player — let alone a rookie — drops off in his level of play beyond the first few games. To this point, Connolly's game has not dipped, but Boucher said that's not an issue at this point when it comes to deciding whether he will stay.

Through eight games, Connolly has two assists, leads all rookies with a plus-4 rating and his 17 shots on goal rank fourth among rookies. In Saturday's game against Buffalo, he had a team-high seven shots.

"The dipping thing with him right now is not an issue, it's can he sustain it and that's very hard to do because it's a projection," Boucher said. "You think you are making the right projection and then three months down the road, whoops, it's the wrong one. Or, you can be misled ... so

projections are very hard to predict and that's why we are very, very cautious. We don't want to be overwhelmed by the good things he does or too disappointed by the things he has to learn. I think right now we've clearly stated that it's a very difficult choice we are going to have to make.

"He'll be in the game (tonight) and then after that I guess (we'll see)."

Lightning general manager Steve Yzerman indicated he has a strong idea of what the team might do regarding Connolly's immediate future, but with one more game still remaining before the decision has to be made, he's not ready to offer the verdict.

"The two biggest factors are, first, what is best for Brett Connolly long term and his development," Yzerman said. "Number two is, what is the right thing to do for our team this year, and they kind of go hand-in-hand. And as I've said before, if he is a contributor on our team, he makes us better and it's best for his career and his development, then we'll keep him."

No matter what the immediate future holds for Connolly, he opened eyes in the organization with his dedication in the gym over the summer, his ability to adapt quickly and think the game at a high level. That means his road to becoming an NHL player already has started. It's just a question of whether the path starts now or there is a minor detour.

Connolly said he's trying not to think about it heading into what could be his final game in the NHL this season.

"For me, it's the same mindset I've had. I'm just trying to take things one day at a time and improve every day," Connolly said. "I'm just looking to try to help the team win (tonight) and try not to think about it too much.

"I'm looking forward to that decision and seeing what they have to say. It's been in the back of my mind, for sure, but you have to push that aside and play your game, try to do the things you can do. And at the end of the day all you can do is play your best and then we'll see what happens."