



# **Buffalo Sabres**

## **Daily Press Clips**

*Monday, December 26, 2011*

## **Sabres have familiar mountain to climb**

*Return to action tonight against Capitals four points out of eighth*

Mike Harrington

The Buffalo News

December 26, 2011

A lot has changed in a year around the Buffalo Sabres. But it's crazy to look at the NHL standings and realize how stunningly similar things are from last Christmas.

And that's not a good thing.

On Dec. 26, 2010, the Sabres were in Calgary practicing for a game against the Flames. They were 14-17-4, in 12th place in the Eastern Conference with 32 points. They were eight points out of a playoff spot and in 26th overall in the NHL.

Tonight — Dec. 26, 2011 — the injury-riddled Sabres open their post-Christmas schedule against the Washington Capitals in First Niagara Center. They're 11th in the East with 35 points. Their record is also slightly better (16-15-3) and they're only four points out of eighth. But they're 23rd overall.

As it turned out last year, the Sabres were the only Eastern Conference team out of the playoffs on Christmas who made it in April (they replaced Atlanta). They're going to have to pull a similar trick again. No one figured this for a team that has spent to the salary cap under new owner Terry Pegula.

"Obviously, we're disappointed," said coach Lindy Ruff. "Injuries aside, you've still got to scrape some wins together."

The Sabres lost last year in Calgary, 5-2, on perhaps their lowest night. It was their first game without gone-for-the-year Derek Roy, Tyler Myers sat out with the flu, Jochen Hecht was burned by Jarome Iginla for a breakaway goal at the end of a long shift and the players had a 15-minute closed door meeting afterward.

But as it turned out, the meeting joined Pegula's purchase of the club as seminal moments of the season. Buffalo won the next night in Edmonton, which started the Sabres on a 29-11-6 run the rest of the way — including 16-4-4 once Pegula's purchase was finalized.

So when captain Jason Pominville convened a players-only skull session on the ice at the end of practice here Friday after Ruff had spoken, it was easy to think back a year.

The situation is different because the Sabres will have at least seven players out tonight and the status of leading goal scorer Thomas Vanek (shoulder) is tenuous. To turn this season around, the Sabres need to get healthy.

Still, they also need to find the kind spark from their meeting that they seemed to get from the one in Calgary.

"We're going to have to be one of the best teams from here on out to climb in the standings," Pominville said. "We're constantly talking, whether it's just with the leadership group or with the team as a whole. You want to have your message clear and understood. If that was a step in the right direction in Calgary, hopefully this is too and we can get back on track.

Ruff agreed.

"There comes certain times in the season you'd like to take and move ahead," the coach said. "Some of this will coincide with getting some bodies back. Hopefully we can come out and maybe get one back [Brad Boyes]. We may lose one [Vanek]. If you keep subtracting, it's not going to get better. It just gets tougher."

"I haven't seen anything quite like [the run of injuries] but you have to keep the faith and the same things you know give you results," said goaltender Ryan Miller. "We've all had results at one point in our careers. It comes down to working hard and paying attention to details. That's the recipe for anybody in the entire league. There's no secret formula."

The Sabres have been one of the biggest disappointments in the NHL this season, and perhaps only tonight's visitor has been a bigger one.

The Capitals were a 107-point team last year and finished atop the East, but they're 10th this year and just one point ahead of the Sabres. Firing coach Bruce Boudreau and replacing him with former Buffalo nemesis Dale Hunter hasn't changed their fortunes much.

Boudreau was whacked two days after his team's complete no-show here Nov. 26, a 5-1 Sabres win on a night Buffalo was without nine players. Under Hunter, the pest who tormented the Sabres with the Quebec Nordiques of the 1980s and the Caps of the 90s, Washington is just 5-5-1.

The Sabres, meanwhile, have lost three straight for the first time this year and will find out more about Vanek and Boyes today. By NHL rules, teams are not allowed to practice Dec. 24-25.

The Sabres had 42 shots on goal in Thursday's 3-2 loss to Toronto but didn't get any reward for their effort as they gave up two goals in a 62-second span of the second period and over back-checked on the winning goal in the third period by Toronto's Nazem Kadri.

"The work that went into the game, you'll get rewarded for it [most times]," Ruff said. "We're just a little bit thin up front. If you continue on the path of trying to outwork your opponent, trying to outshoot your opponent, having your special teams be better, the wins will come."

## **Sabres' Leopold spreads smiles**

### *Parents appreciate visits in hospital*

John Vogl

The Buffalo News

December 25, 2011

It was 90 minutes into Jordan Leopold's visit to Women and Children's Hospital when a staffer suggested he and his friends end their Christmas rounds. The rest of the kids would be sleeping, many because their medications had kicked in.

Leopold insisted on continuing Friday's gift-giving tour.

"It's not always about the kids," the Sabres' defenseman said. "It's about the parents, too."

Leopold has been making monthly visits to the Buffalo care center for more than a year. He learned early that bringing a smile to a sick child is one thing, but brightening the day of heavy-hearted parents is an entirely different reward.

"You can see the parents light up when we come in the room, say hello and spend five minutes talking," Leopold said. "Sometimes when you're in the hospital, all you want is an ear. To go in there and listen to somebody if they want to talk about their hard times or what they're going through, it's interesting for us, and we're there also as a heartfelt extension of their family because you don't ever want to see people going through that."

The benefits of the visit became evident when Leopold, teammate Patrick Kaleta (both clad in elf costumes) and Buffalo's mascot, Sabretooth, reached the room of Peighton Hulin. Christina Cameron, the mother of the 2-year-old, immediately welled up while hugging Leopold and the much-needed visitors.

"Peighton's always here," said Cameron, dressed in a Sabres jersey and logoed winter hat. She and Peighton's father, Brian Hulin, continued a tearful embrace well after they had thanked the players and watched them walk to the room of the next patient.

"We appreciate the visit," Hulin said.

Sabres legend Rob Ray seconds Leopold's notion that charitable visits can do more for the parents than their kids. Ray and other members of the team's alumni association were scheduled to bring gifts, clothes and food to more than 40 families Saturday, a Christmas Eve tradition he and ex-teammate Charlie Huddy started in 1994.

"Give them what they need to have a Christmas because in most cases they normally wouldn't have a Christmas," said Ray, who has also frequented hospitals. "It's the smile on the parents' face that we see. They have to deal with it. I always say a lot of times in the kids' cases they don't know any different because they've been sick forever or since they were born."

"You notice it more when you're a father or a parent because you know when your kids get a cold you feel like hell because there's nothing you can do. You get a lot better feeling for what those parents go through and what the kids go through being in there."

Back in 1999, Ray worried that his program would end with his playing days. It's continued into his announcing career, one of many charitable acts performed by current and former players:

\* Pat LaFontaine and his Companions in Courage Foundation will be in Ottawa's Eastern Ontario Children's Hospital next month to open the 15th Lion's Den, an interactive playroom that is also in Roswell Park Cancer Institute and Women and Children's Hospital.

\* Thomas Vanek and Brad Boyes joined with the NHL Players' Association's Goals and Dreams, with Vanek donating \$13,000 worth of equipment to Ice Sledge Hockey of Austria and Boyes supplying 50 sets of equipment to Skate for Kids in Welland, Ont.

\* Leopold and Cody McCormick each send one family a month from the hospital to a Sabres game, supplying them with tickets, food vouchers and a visit to the locker room.

"It's just the thing you're supposed to do," Ray said. "It's life. The game is not reality. You walk in there and it's reality. We live in a fantasy world for most of our lives, and it's good that guys realize that there's two sides of it.

"Now it's come to the point where guys want to bring their kids and family just to show them what the other side is really about. It's pretty educational for them. My daughter [Jordan] is 7, and I take her now. I know she definitely looks at things differently and gets her eyes opened up."

Leopold, a father of three, made secret solo visits to the hospital throughout last season. This year, he's been accompanied by Kaleta, McCormick and Nathan Gerbe, while Mike Weber has also expressed his desire to join.

"I don't want any recognition or anything, but I think it's important to give back some way," Leopold said. "I love spending time with kids and seeing smiles on their face. Not even all kids know what hockey is when you go there, but you end up leaving and you had Sabretooth with you, it makes an impact."

One of Leopold's favorite sights is an empty hospital room. A lot of kids on the oncology floor were able to get home this weekend. But the intensive care unit was packed. Leopold also saw several familiar patients, and he chatted with their parents about the onset of seizures or a relapse in symptoms.

Though it's tough to see the same families over and over, the repeat encounters have their moments. A boy named Manny, who was hospitalized for more than 200 days, used to help Leopold deliver gifts before finally going home. Leopold learned Friday that Nick, who was spending his 188th day in Women and Children's, could finally be heading to a group home this week.

Leopold told the boy he would see him there, too. He won't be carrying bags filled with Winnie the Pooh night lights, American Girl dolls, hockey cards and candy canes like he did Friday, but he will supply his visitors with something they need even more -- a smile.

"I've gotten several letters from family members that have seen us from the hospital or grandparents that heard we were there," Leopold said. "They send letters to the team saying thank you for stopping by, so obviously myself and a few other staff members and players are doing something right."

## **Return of Myers not far off**

*The injured Sabres defenseman is improving*

Mike Harrington

The Buffalo News

December 24, 2011

It may not be all the Buffalo Sabres want or need for Christmas but they could use defenseman Tyler Myers on the ice. The 6-foot-8 Myers keeps progressing from his broken wrist and has another appointment with team doctors on Monday.

Myers isn't ruling out a return to games late next week, although coach Lindy Ruff said that's probably premature. Myers has been out since suffering the injury Nov. 19 against Phoenix, when the Sabres were 12-8-0. They're 4-7-3 since and have sunk to 11th place in the Eastern Conference.

"I know I'm close [to returning]," Myers said after skating with the team for an hour Friday morning in First Niagara Center. "It's just a matter of getting where I need to be before I jump in."

Specifically, Myers' hand needs to get dramatically better to allow him to shoot and handle the puck the way he's used to. He's been skating and doing puckhandling for a few days, but his shot remains weak.

Myers has already been ruled out of Monday's game against Washington here and it's a longshot he would play on the road next week in New Jersey and Washington or in the New Year's Eve game here against Ottawa. The Jan. 3 visit by Edmonton might be realistic.

"He's got a ways to go," Ruff said. "He can't handle the puck very well or shoot yet. I think that will come quickly, but he's not going to be available."

Myers had just two goals, six points and a minus-3 rating when he was hurt and was just two games removed from his first career healthy scratch Nov. 14 in Montreal. But he played more than 21 minutes in 15 games and was a workhorse on the Sabres' special teams. Ruff noted last week how those areas have suffered without him and the numbers bear that out.

When Myers was hurt, the Sabres were seventh in the NHL on the power play at 19.2 percent and third in penalty killing at 90 percent.

Heading into Friday's games, the Sabres had slipped to 14th on the power play and ninth in penalty killing overall. In Myers' absence, their percentages have been 16.1 on the PP and an abysmal 76.6 on the PK.

Myers said he's trying to level his frustration with the injury against his team's struggles and not push himself to cause a setback.

"It's just taking steps. The more I can lean on the stick, the more I can bear down on shots," he said. "I'll be able to gauge it. ... It's been a lot better. I've been able to take my splint off, just work with tape, get a little bit more movement out there. Hopefully that brings strength back a little quicker."

Myers is one of nine injured Sabres, and that list now includes Thomas Vanek, as the team's leading goal scorer couldn't answer the call for the third period of Thursday's 3-2 loss in Toronto. His status is unknown for next week.

Vanek is believed to have suffered a shoulder injury on a hit from Pittsburgh's James Neal during Saturday's 8-3 loss to the Penguins. Ruff said Vanek would see team doctors Friday for an update.

The coach said Tyler Ennis was unable to skate on his sore ankle Friday. On the plus side, Jochen Hecht tested his sore leg prior to practice and is improving. Brad Boyes (ankle) remains the closest to returning and could play Monday.

Ruff briefly met with players on the ice after the workout to wish them well over the holiday and remind them to be ready for Monday morning's pregame skate (the NHL does not allow teams to practice Dec. 24 or 25). Captain Jason Pominville then briefly met with the team as well without the coaches.

Pominville, who was visibly frustrated after Thursday's game, didn't want to divulge what he said but agreed the break comes at a good time.

"This break has to be an advantage for us to regroup, refocus and energize ourselves for what's ahead," Pominville said.

Cracked defenseman Jordan Leopold: "We have to totally get away from it, listen to nothing but Christmas music and eat pie and turkey and whatever else it may be. Maybe even put on a couple extra pounds for battle in front of the net."

## **That's life on the Sabres' farm**

*Amerks stay afloat with makeshift lineups as Buffalo battles through a ridiculous run of injuries*

John Vogl

The Buffalo News

December 24, 2011

ROCHESTER -- Ron Rolston knew he'd work a lot during his first season as a head coach. He just never figured he'd have as much in common with Travelocity's roaming gnome as Lindy Ruff.

The ridiculous run of injuries for the Buffalo Sabres has had a landslide effect on their minor-league club in Rochester. The steady stream of Amerks heading to the NHL has forced Rolston to find players from all over the country to fill out his squad.

"It's crazy," Rolston said this week. "Sometimes you think you're more of a travel coordinator, just trying to make things work and get guys in."

The Amerks entered their Christmas break with a makeshift roster that featured four players skating on tryout contracts and another two up from the ECHL. They've competed with an incomplete lineup three times, including a loss Dec. 4 when they were two men short.

"The only team I feel worse for than the Buffalo Sabres because of injuries is the Rochester Americans," said Ted Black, president of both clubs. "It hits them probably even more so. They have their own injury problems, then to worry about our injuries ..."

"That's our job," Rolston said. "Obviously, this has been very tough for them with the injuries, and we just want to be able to supply them with players that can help them be successful. That's our job, and we understand.

"But we also are competitive, and you want to do well yourself. It's been challenging in the first half, for sure."

Both teams hoped the holiday season would present them with healthy bodies. The Amerks have held their own during the injury plague, going 5-5-2 since late November, but they're ready to have a consistent roster rather than scan for players in Toledo, Trenton and Las Vegas.

"We've just been calling around," said Rolston, who chats with the organization's scouts and contacts coaches at the minor-league, college and junior levels for background information on players. "You try to do as much as you can because we don't want to bring people in that aren't going to add to our team, whether it's play or in the locker room. I think that's vital. You have to bring guys in that are willing to work hard and want to fit in to what we want to do here."

There have been benefits to the madness. Rolston and his new staff, which includes former Sabres Jay McKee and Chris Taylor, have become acquainted while teaching the newcomers. Also, the players have been eager to work and learn because they know the next Buffalo injury might mean a call-up.

"Guys get opportunities that typically wouldn't happen," said Rochester defenseman T.J. Brennan, who played three games for the Sabres. "Your ultimate goal is to be there, so it's good to be there as soon as possible and make a name for yourself. If you take pride in a few little things, especially now with guys getting hurt, you could be there."

The Sabres have summoned a player from Rochester 17 times. They had 11 recalls through this point last year, though most were up only for a game or two compared to the recent extended stays.

"We've been in a situation where they have quite a few of our forwards, they have a defenseman, they've had a goaltender," Rolston said. "That's good in a sense that guys know they're pretty close and say, 'I've got to get better in these areas, and I can be that guy that goes up and gets an opportunity.'"

The chaos has come during a season that is meant to be a celebration. Buffalo and Rochester, affiliated for 29 years before splitting in 2008, are back together under owner Terry Pegula.

"It's been more than we expected," Black said. "Our season-ticket sales have been up something like 70 percent over last year, so fans really have responded well. The reception we have received has been fantastic, and the business community has very, very much welcomed us. I think the fans are excited by the reunification."

The Amerks are averaging 5,027 fans per game, which ranks 13th in the 30-team AHL. While affiliated with the Florida Panthers last season, Rochester drew just 3,872 fans to rank 25th.

It's clear teaming with the Sabres has helped. At Wednesday's 4-1 victory over Lake Erie in Blue Cross Arena at the War Memorial, Sabres gear was more prevalent than Amerks garb. Blue and Gold jerseys of Thomas Vanek, Nathan Gerbe, Patrick Kaleta and Ryan Miller dotted nearly every section.

Even the fans in Amerks sweaters showed their Sabres roots, wearing the Rochester jerseys of Miller, Derek Roy and former Buffalo forward Clarke MacArthur.

"It's nice for the fans to follow the young guys going up to Buffalo," said Taylor, the assistant coach who played nine seasons for the Amerks and spent parts of four in Buffalo. "Buffalo's always on TV, and then when you notice guys that actually played here up there just an hour away, it's a marriage made in heaven."

The cities' proximity has helped on those days when the Sabres needed a quick fill-in. There have been a lot. Rolston hopes things calm down so he can hone his coaching skills and not his flight tracking.

"I'm kind of glad in a way because I've grown a lot more through the adversity of what's going on," Rolston said. "You really have to grow and make changes and understand this is probably going to be some of the worst times you have. Getting through this right now and how much it's going to help me as a coach ... I think you have to look at it optimistically."

## **Sabres hope to end skid against Caps**

Brian Compton

NHL.com

December 25, 2011

### **CAPITALS (17-14-2) at SABRES (16-15-3)**

**TV:** RIS (HD), NHLN-CA, CSN-MA+, MSG-B

**Last 10:** Washington 5-4-1; Buffalo 3-5-2.

**Season Series:** This is the second of four meetings between the teams. Buffalo cruised to a 5-1 victory against Washington on Nov. 26 at First Niagara Center. [Luke Adam](#) had a pair of goals for the Sabres.

**Big Story:** Will Dale Hunter be the coach of the Capitals beyond this season?

Hunter, who replaced Bruce Boudreau on Nov. 28, refused to comment late last week when asked about his future with the club. The Capitals are 5-5-1 under Hunter following Friday's 4-3 shootout loss to New Jersey.

Should things not work out in Washington, Hunter could always return to the Ontario Hockey League. He was co-owner of the London Knights before agreeing to replace Boudreau.

"Maybe he wanted the one year for his own reasons; only he knows," Caps defenseman [Karl Alzner](#) said of his coach. "For me, it doesn't change the message. I don't think a lot of guys pay attention to that. I don't think that he's here to coach us for the year and go do his own thing. He's here to help us win and he wants to win, too. We're all in the same boat."

### **Team Scope:**

**Capitals:** Washington rallied just to pick up a point Friday night, as [Jason Chimera](#) scored twice and [Brooks Laich](#) also scored in the third period to help the Caps come back from a 3-0 deficit. Chimera's second goal of the night tied the game with just 1:42 left in regulation.

"We spent so much time early on looking for the right combination and things just started to work in the third period," Hunter said. "We had our chances to win this one. We kept the pressure on them, finally got some goals, but we couldn't get the last one. I told them to just go out there and work hard and we'd get better chances. They never gave up and just came up short. I'm happy with the effort."

**Sabres:** Buffalo will be aiming to avoid a four-game skid Monday night. The Sabres suffered their third straight loss in a 3-2 defeat at Toronto on Thursday, as Buffalo went just 1-for-6 on the power play. [Jason Pominville](#) and [Derek Roy](#) scored in the losing effort.

"Obviously the couple days rest here is going to be nice to spend time with our families and maybe not think about hockey -- think about other things," Pominville said of the Christmas break. "But we wanted to end this on a pretty good note. The effort was there, the results weren't and if we keep putting efforts on like this and limit those little (mental mistakes) a little bit, we're going to get on a roll here."

**Who's Hot:** Caps captain [Alex Ovechkin](#) has 2 goals and an assist in his last four contests. ... Pominville has 2 goals and 8 assists in his last eight games and 11 points in his last 10.

**Injury Report:** Washington will be without [Mike Green](#) (groin), [Jay Beagle](#) (concussion symptoms) and [Tom Poti](#) (groin). ... Buffalo has a long list of injuries, including: [Thomas Vanek](#) (upper body), [Tyler Ennis](#) (ankle), [Colin Stuart](#) (knee), [Jochen Hecht](#) (lower body), [Corey Tropp](#) (head), [Nathan Gerbe](#) (concussion), [Tyler Myers](#) (wrist), [Brad Boyes](#) (lower body) and [Ville Leino](#) (lower body). Vanek, Myers and Boyes could be in the lineup against the Caps.

**Stat Pack:** The Capitals are 6-1 in games decided in overtime, but on Friday fell to 1-2 in games decided by shootout. ... Sabres center [Derek Roy](#) has only 2 goals in his last 17 games.

**Puck Drop:** "It's up to us to come to the rink and work to get better. Come to the rink and try to improve every day regardless if you're winning or losing." -- *Sabres goalie* [Ryan Miller](#)

## Washington (17-14-2) at Buffalo (16-15-3)

Mike Lipka

STATS

December 25, 2011

Both the [Washington Capitals](#) and the [Buffalo Sabres](#) spent Christmas feeling dissatisfied about their seasons so far. Each team will have plenty to say about whether the other can begin to turn things around before the end of 2011.

The frustrated clubs square off Monday night at Buffalo in the first of two meetings in a five-day span.

The Sabres (16-15-3) haven't exactly played well at the First Niagara Center, going 7-9-3 there, but they must be happy to be back in western New York after getting outscored 15-6 on an 0-3-0 trip before the holiday break.

They had 42 shots Thursday at Toronto and killed all six of the Maple Leafs' power-play opportunities, but that somehow still added up to a 3-2 loss - their eighth defeat in 11 games overall.

"Obviously the couple days rest here is going to be nice to spend time with our families and maybe not think about hockey - think about other things," leading scorer [Jason Pominville](#) said. "But we wanted to end this on a pretty good note. The effort was there, the results weren't and if we keep putting efforts on like this and limit those little brain farts a little bit, we're going to get on a roll here."

Much like Buffalo, the Capitals (17-14-2) expect to return to the postseason but find themselves outside of playoff position.

They can at least find reason for optimism after coming back from a 3-0 deficit in the third period Friday at New Jersey, earning a point in a 4-3 shootout loss.

"They never gave up. And we've been doing it lots of times," coach Dale Hunter said. "We came up short, but they never gave up, so that's a good sign for our team."

The Capitals have been outscored in the first and second periods this season, but they have a 39-32 edge in the final 20 minutes of regulation. They haven't been outscored in the final period in nine consecutive games.

"We're really comfortable in the third," center [Brooks Laich](#) said. "Teams spend a lot of energy in the first two periods against us and we're able to push in the third, but we have to have that push earlier in the game, too."

[Jason Chimera](#) scored twice in the third against the Devils, taking over the team lead with 13 goals - ahead of more likely candidates such as [Alex Ovechkin](#) and [Alexander Semin](#).

Ovechkin, who hasn't had a multipoint game in his last 22 contests, was a minus-4 in a 5-1 loss at Buffalo on Nov. 26. That was one of the roughest games of the season for goalie [Tomas Vokoun](#), and [Michal Neuvirth](#) has started the Capitals' last four games after replacing him during a 5-1 loss to Philadelphia earlier this month.

Whichever goalie is in net may not have to face Sabres sniper [Thomas Vanek](#), who couldn't finish his team's most recent game due to an upper-body injury. He's part of a lengthy Buffalo injured list, which includes standout defenseman [Tyler Myers](#), former 40-goal scorer [Brad Boyes](#) and newcomer [Ville Leino](#).

[Ryan Miller](#) has struggled to carry the load. The former Vezina Trophy winner has a 3.44 goals-against average in eight starts since returning from a concussion, and a 4.45 mark on the Sabres' recent trip.

He's lost four of his last five starts against Washington, which hosts the Sabres on Friday.

## LOOKING FOR ANSWERS

Kevin Snow

Sabres.com

December 21, 2011

**TORONTO** – At this time last year, [Drew Stafford](#) had nine goals in 20 games, his playing time limited due to a pair of injuries that kept him out of a combined 15 games. This season he has only scored six times in 32 games, and his frustration level has gone from a simmer to a slow boil. It was never more evident than last night in Ottawa when he passed to [Derek Roy](#) during a two-on-one, instead of taking the wide open shot from the slot.

Lindy Ruff knows what Stafford is capable of, and shared his thoughts with the snake-bitten sniper during a 15-minute on-ice chat at the end of today's practice at the Air Canada Centre.

“He said to me ‘I don't know why I didn't shoot it,’” Ruff said afterwards. “He lacks some confidence when it comes to scoring, and he's passed up some good opportunities. His frustration level is pretty high. I said ‘those are situations you wouldn't normally pass up; you know you're a shooter.’ I think when things go well, it's automatic. When things aren't going well, you second-guess yourself.”

Stafford knows exactly what it feels like when things are going well. After his slow start last season, he exploded for 22 goals in the final 42 games, including a four-game run that saw him light the lamp eight times on just 13 shots. Plays like the one he made last night are the things he'd like to eliminate from his game right now.

“I'm kind of searching for some goals here, and it's one of the plays that you'd like to have back,” he explained. “I can't do anything about it now, but next time I'd like to put it in the back of the net.

“It's one of those things where I thought I could maybe make a little pass to Derek, instead of just going straight down, driving and finding a hole to put it in. I can't do anything about it now, but I'll work to get in that position again and pull the trigger.”

---

[Thomas Vanek](#) and [Paul Szczechura](#) were given today off to rest their bumps and bruises, but Ruff expects both to be ready for Thursday's game here against the Maple Leafs. Ruff also said [Patrick Kaleta](#) is a go for Thursday, but likely not [Brad Boyes](#). In the case of Boyes, Ruff said “it's a gamble” because he hasn't had enough time to prepare himself with the down-low battle drills that will really put his injured ankle to the test. It seems more likely that Boyes will take the Christmas break to ready himself for Monday's home game against Washington.

---

In other injury updates: [Tyler Myers](#) (wrist) is skating with the team but not in a full-contact role ... [Nathan Gerbe](#) (concussion) has been skating on his own the last two days back in Buffalo ... [Tyler Ennis](#) (ankle) is traveling with the team, but was kept off the ice again today as a precautionary measure ... [Corey Tropp](#) (concussion) is still not feeling well, and hasn't skated since being injured against Florida on December 9.

## **What more could Whitmore want for Christmas?**

*After 272 minor-league games, Rochester native finally called up to join Sabres*

Bill Hoppe

Niagara Gazette

December 24, 2011

TORONTO — In Derek Whitmore, Buffalo Sabres journeyman Matt Ellis saw himself — an undrafted, hardworking and optimistic player poised to earn his longshot chance in the NHL.

Whitmore left Bowling Green State University in 2008 as a non-prospect, a free agent whose path to the big leagues was blocked by a slew of touted youngsters, established veterans and an AHL contract.

“If you work hard enough, your opportunity will come,” Ellis, who cracked the NHL after 318 minor league games, told Whitmore.

Today, following 272 AHL appearances, Whitmore’s playing for the Sabres, living a dream few thought he’d reach. The Sabres’ stunning rash of injuries necessitated Whitmore’s first recall Monday.

“You just try to not think too much about it,” Whitmore said Wednesday inside the Air Canada Centre. “Obviously, it’s the grand stage, the NHL. I’ve worked hard for it my entire life. At the same time, a lot of the guys just said it’s the same game. The game hasn’t changed, just the players are better.”

The 27-year-old Rochester native has progressed each season and paid a lot of dues.

Last year, he quietly scored 27 goals in Portland. This campaign, he’s the glue holding his hometown Americans together. His 13 goals and 20 points lead them. Some say he’s their heart-and-soul player.

“I’ve seen a lot of myself in the way he played and his attitude and the way he approached the game,” Ellis said. “I’m really proud that he got the opportunity to step up in the National Hockey League.”

When Whitmore was an unknown neophyte unsure where his career would head, the advice, the pick-me-ups from Ellis, a waiver-wire addition who began his career in the ECHL, began.

“There’s some times where maybe I’d be down on myself, maybe not playing well,” Whitmore said. “He’d always try to keep me positive and just make sure I always had a good work ethic.”

Making his NHL debut on the left wing beside Ellis on Tuesday in Ottawa thrilled him.

Whitmore shared the night with another influential person. While Marcus Foligno, who also played his first NHL game, needed 30 tickets, Whitmore had just one person watching inside Scotiabank Place, his wife, Sarah.

“For her to make a trip to Ottawa says a lot about her, what it meant to her,” Whitmore said. “After the game, when I was able to spend a little bit of time with her, it was a pretty special feeling.”

It's unclear how long Whitmore will last in Buffalo. The Sabres, down eight forwards, could get one or two back next week.

Whatever happens, Whitmore's made a positive first impression.

Following three games in three days and a travel day Monday from Texas, he impressed during 14:02 in the Sabres' 4-1 loss to the Senators, even getting regular duty on the No. 2 power-play unit.

"It was just nice to be thrown right in the fire," said Whitmore, who generated a couple of strong scoring chances.

He took a regular shift again Thursday in a 3-2 loss to Toronto.

Whitmore's possibly in the Sabres' plans now, even as a depth player. His breakout 2010-11 campaign essentially made him an older prospect, earning him his first two-way contract.

"Every year he finds a way to score 20-plus goals," Sabres coach Lindy Ruff said. "(Americans coach) Ron (Rolston) has spoken highly of him, just said he finds a way to score key goals at key opportunities. I think that's how he's gotten himself on the radar. The year before, same thing, he was able to score a lot of key goals for Portland."

Whitmore appeared close to receiving a recall heading into the season. Still, the Sabres summoned five forwards before him.

"Sometimes guys get too wrapped up in the, 'Why is this guy going up and I'm not?'" Whitmore said. "It totally affects how they play, and it doesn't do anybody any good to have that attitude. It was definitely very hard to not be upset and not be frustrated.

"But at the same time, playing in the American Hockey League for the Rochester Americans was really not that bad of a deal. You got to keep everything in perspective."

Whitmore realizes he has a special gig playing at home in Rochester. His parents are season-ticket holders. Other family and friends attend each game.

"Every home game I got friends and family calling me, seeing if there's any extra tickets, stuff like that, which I totally don't mind," Whitmore said. "It's pretty neat after games when I walk to see my wife, my family. I got 10, 12 family members there, too, waiting for me. So it's pretty neat playing in Rochester."

Almost as neat as playing in Buffalo.

## **Struggling Sabres take a break**

Bill Hoppe

Niagara Gazette

December 23, 2011

BUFFALO — Before the struggling Sabres left the ice Friday and began a much needed two-day Christmas break, captain Jason Pominville called his teammates together and addressed them, giving them some advice to take into the holiday.

What did he say following the hour-long practice inside the First Niagara Center?

“Just kind of wishing everybody a Merry Christmas and enjoying the time off,” said Pominville, who refused to reveal his full message.

Clearly, the reeling Sabres, losers three straight and eight of the last 11, need a couple of days away from hockey to clear their heads.

“We’ve been living, breathing (what) seems like the same day for a good month,” Sabres defenseman Jordan Leopold said. “We’ve had a lot of criticism. We haven’t played the way we want to play and haven’t gotten the results we wanted.

“We totally get away from it, listen to nothing but Christmas music and eat pie and turkey and whatever it may be. Maybe put on a couple extra pounds and battle in front of the net.”

What kind of pie, Jordan?

“Pumpkin, for me,” he said.

Right now, maybe some nice dessert will help. Nothing is going the Sabres’ way. They’ve plummeted to 11th place in the Eastern Conference. They’re down nine players to injury. On Thursday in Toronto, they pumped 42 shots on goal during a strong effort, yet still lost 3-2.

“The frustrating part,” Pominville said, “is you put that much effort in and you don’t get the results you want. ... This break kind of has to be an advantage for us to regroup, refocus and re-energize ourselves for what’s ahead of us.”

Buffalo goes back to work at home Monday against Washington. For the Sabres, the brief pause could be a line in the sand, a chance to treat the next three-plus months like a fresh season.

That happened last year. Following an awful 5-2 loss Dec. 27 in Calgary, the Sabres regrouped, storming from 12th to seventh with a 29-11-6 finish.

“We’re going to have to be one of the best teams from here on out to climb in the standings, to keep moving,” Pominville said. “Part of the reason we were successful last year was our play with the puck and our defensive play was really solid.”

## Mike Green's absence is new normal for Capitals

John McDonnell

Washington Post

December 25, 2011

As the [Washington Capitals](#) step on the ice in Buffalo on Monday evening they will do so with a much too familiar vacancy on their defense. The game against the Sabres will be the 20th consecutive and 26th of the season [without Mike Green in the lineup](#).

Over the past two seasons, Green's absence from the lineup has become a new normal for Washington and a trying time for the two-time Norris Trophy finalist. Dating from Feb. 8 of last season, Green has missed 52 of the past 62 regular season contests because of injury.

It's unclear when Green, who was not made available to comment for this story, will return from his latest setback, a strained right groin muscle that he suffered in mid-November. When Green's recovery plateaued two weeks ago, the Capitals decided to take an experimental route with his rehabilitation, according to several people familiar with the situation who requested anonymity because they were not authorized to discuss the defenseman's recovery.

Green received Accelerated Recovery Performance (ARP) treatment, which involves electrical stimulation, in Minnesota, according to those people. It's unclear whether Green, who skated for five days prior to the NHL's holiday break, has benefited from the program.

But while Green's teammates, coaches and agent, as well as Capitals' officials await his return, all say the groin injury will not pose a significant threat to the defenseman's career. But there's no denying that the steady string of ailments have had an impact on it.

"The last two years, he's had a lot of things go wrong — the concussions, now the groin and the foot," said [Nicklas Backstrom](#), one of Green's close friends on the team. "I think he's trying to be as positive as he can and get back as soon as possible, but it's tough for him. You can see he's frustrated. I feel bad for him and I want to see him play hockey again. That's all he wants to do."

In the 2008-09 and 2009-10 seasons, Green led all NHL defensemen in points. But in the two years since, he has been sidelined by injuries to his shoulder, knee and hip flexor, a pair of concussions, a twisted right ankle and now the groin strain. The limited playing time has kept Green, 26, from continuing his evolution as a player, whether that would have included becoming a consistent two-way presence or continuing to dominate with his offense.

It's possible that Green's lack of durability could result in a pay cut. The Calgary native will earn \$5 million this season in the final year of his current contract, a four-year deal worth \$21 million, and become a restricted free agent this summer. In order to retain Green's negotiating rights in the offseason, the Capitals will need to make a qualifying offer of a one-year deal worth \$5 million.

Green played his best game of this season on Oct. 22 when he [tied his career high of four points in a single contest](#) in Washington's 7-1 win over Detroit, but he missed the next six games with

the twisted ankle. Less than eight minutes into his return to the lineup, on Nov. 11, Green was hit in the corner by New Jersey's Ryan Carter and suffered the groin strain.

"Mike's missed more significant time than he would have liked recently, but it's beyond his control — beyond anyone's control," said Craig Oster, Green's agent. "He was very excited about starting the year and taking another step personally, and as a team. The part that is encouraging, in all of these unfortunate circumstances, is that none of the injuries have been of a real significant variety that should have any lasting impact on Mike's ability to play in the long term."

Green's groin injury came not long after the Capitals lost [Tom Poti](#) to persistent groin problems. Poti was among the team's top three in ice time for three seasons before he played in just 21 games in 2010-11. There is no sign that Poti, who is under contract through 2012-13 but not with the team, will play again and while Green's injury is not believed to be as severe, it's difficult not to draw parallels as his absence lengthens.

Green was making progress in his recovery from the groin strain when he slammed his stick into the boards on Dec. 8 as he went off the ice. Shortly after that incident, which the team insisted wasn't a setback, the Capitals sent Green to Minnesota, according to people familiar with the situation.

The program involves a machine called the ARPwave, which sends electrical current through targeted areas of the body in conjunction with controlled movement, to help promote recovery from injury. The ARPwave is not widely used, but is growing in popularity among professional and college athletes to speed rehabilitation, keep muscles relaxed and refresh tissue.

According to league sources, Capitals' assistant general manager for player personnel Brian MacLellan owns and uses an ARPwave machine. Boston goaltender Tim Thomas is one player who has publicly acknowledged his use of the system and thanked its developers when he accepted the Vezina Trophy in 2011.

There remains no timetable for Green's return, but when he does the defenseman will have two new coaches and must adapt to a new system of play. Green has attended team meetings and video sessions under Coach Dale Hunter and worked with assistant coach Jim Johnson, but it remains to be seen how he will fit into a style of play that doesn't encourage as much offensive risk-taking as former coach Bruce Boudreau's approach.

Of the 82 goals and 250 points Green accumulated in his career, he recorded 76 and 229, respectively, with Boudreau behind the bench.

"He's been involved in all our meetings, he knows exactly the way we're playing and he understands what we want to do," Johnson said. "When he gets closer we'll spend a little more time with him on the ice, get him more involved in the practices. . . . We all want Mike back in the lineup, but only when he's 100 percent. It doesn't help us to rush him only to have something else go wrong."

## Capitals' road woes pinned on sluggish starts

Stephen Whyno

Washington Times

December 25, 2011

NEWARK, N.J. — Outside the friendly confines of Verizon Center, the [Washington Capitals](#) know they need to be careful. In hockey, the home team gets the final line change and can set the matchups it wants and can often use that to great advantage.

The Caps learned again on Friday night how hard it is to win on the road, falling behind by three and leaving [Prudential](#) Center with a 4-3 shootout loss to the [New Jersey Devils](#).

“We’ve got to take a little bit from it. The fact that we did battle back in the third was good. We had a good third period, worked hard and started to do the things that we wanted to do,” defenseman [Karl Alzner](#) said. “The reason we were down is we beat ourselves in the first two periods.”

The first two periods in New Jersey appeared to be a textbook example of how not to start on the road, allowing plenty of open ice and forcing goaltender [Michal Neuvirth](#) to keep the Caps in the game. But perhaps it’s a well-timed lesson.

The Caps are 6-9-1 away from home this season (13 points out of a possible 32) going into a week in which they visit the [Buffalo Sabres](#) and [Columbus Blue Jackets](#). Generally, all hockey teams follow the same principles when playing on the road.

“You want to take the fans out of it,” forward [Brooks Laich](#) said. “If you can get a lead, quiet the building down and then push them back a little bit.”

They’ve managed to succeed at that only a few times this season, like in October at the [Philadelphia Flyers](#) and at the [Carolina Hurricanes](#) in early November. [Jason Chimera](#) called the first half of Friday night’s shootout defeat a lesson of “what not to do with the puck and what not to do playing hockey.”

“It was a bad 30 minutes ... We weren’t ready to play,” he said. “The execution was terrible. We looked like pee-wee hockey players. No one could make a pass. No one was getting the puck out. We were fanning on the puck.”

A methodical third-period comeback, aided by some luck and a [Devils](#) team that couldn’t crack [Neuvirth](#) again, allowed the Caps to escape with a point and show something.

“Great character by the guys to come back and tie this up, get a point,” forward Troy Brouwer said. “[But] we can’t put ourselves in that position to start with.”

For a Caps group that has struggled on the road, a lot of it is about getting back to basics, like a strong Dale Hunter forecheck and just being responsible defensively. Then, there’s being conscious of the spark that a home team can get.

“I think always the first period is really, really hard. The home team usually comes out pretty tough,” [Alzner](#) said. “I think that we need to maybe re-emphasize things that we need to do before the game a little bit more, as players. We should have maybe reminded ourselves more, because we weren’t doing it.”

The last time the Caps played in Buffalo — where they’ll be Monday night — they got blasted 5-1 in the final game under Bruce Boudreau. And though similar consequences won’t happen if they can’t beat the [Sabres](#) this time around, players understand that they can’t let complacency get to them, either.

“We went from playing a really solid style of game against Nashville to thinking, ‘Oh maybe we’re back on the winning train. Let’s just do that,’ ” [Alzner](#) said. “So we kind of got away from our game.”

Rediscovering that game will go a long way to discovering some winning ways on the road.