



Buffalo Sabres

Daily Press Clips

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Leafs get last laugh on Sabres

Toronto has won five of last six meetings in Northeast Division rivalry

John Vogl

The Buffalo News

January 13, 2012

It's been a winter tradition for years. Fans of the Toronto Maple Leafs make a ton of noise when the puck drops against the Buffalo Sabres. Then, at the end of the game, they quietly leave the arena with a loss. It hasn't mattered whether the game is in Hockey Heaven or the Centre of the Hockey Universe. The outcome has been as consistent as snowdrifts and freezing temperatures in January.

Well, in case you haven't noticed, there are a lot of grassy lawns and lightweight coats around town. There's also been a change in the rivalry.

When Leafs Nation invades First Niagara Center tonight, it will do so with bragging rights. Toronto has won five of the last six meetings with the Sabres, a run that's almost as unthinkable as ice-free creeks in the middle of winter.

"They're definitely a different team," Sabres right wing Drew Stafford said Thursday.

Indeed, it appears the Leafs have tired of being the Sabres' whipping boys. Buffalo tormented Toronto once the lockout ended, going on a 29-8-1 run that had Sabres fans laughing as they pocketed piles of loonies earned by scalping their tickets.

But since a predictable 6-2 win by Buffalo last February, it's been Toronto's time. The Leafs closed last season with three straight victories and have earned two of three this year, including a 2-0 shutout Tuesday.

"They're a better team," Sabres coach Lindy Ruff said. "They've already gone and proved it through the first 40 games."

Toronto is eight points and four spots ahead of Buffalo in the Eastern Conference standings. The seventh-place Leafs can put Buffalo 10 points back tonight.

"It definitely feels like we're moving in the right direction," said Leafs goalie Jonas Gustavsson, who made 32 saves Tuesday. "We're really good right now."

Toronto hasn't made the playoffs since 2004. Buffalo played a big part in that. Now, with improvement up north, it could be the Leafs who push the Sabres out of a postseason position.

"It just makes it harder for everyone else," Stafford said of teams such as Toronto and Florida taking spots in the top eight. "It makes it closer for everyone else and that much of a battle if you're falling behind. It makes it harder for us. We need to crawl back into this, but teams like that are making it more difficult."

Gustavsson has keyed the Leafs' current run. He's been in net throughout the four-game winning streak and earned two victories with shutouts. The Monster is 9-2 since mid-November.

"That goaltender now is really playing well," said Ruff, whose team has just 11 goals in the last seven games. "Obviously, we've struggled on the offensive side of it. There's nothing easy about this game."

A few other tweaks have the Leafs feeling they can end their playoff drought. They added Joffrey Lupul via trade last February, and he and fellow forward Phil Kessel have formed a potent bond. Kessel entered Thursday's games tied for second in the NHL with 48 points, including 24 goals, while Lupul was tied for fourth just a point behind.

When healthy, free-agent additions Tim Connolly and John-Michael Liles have also helped lift the Leafs to a 22-15-5 record.

"All it takes is a tweak or two, get the winning atmosphere, guys feel good about themselves," Sabres left wing Thomas Vanek said. "Those guys feel pretty good. Anytime you win a couple games in a row like they have, everything comes a little easier out there."

The Sabres do have a few things going for them. They've still dominated the Leafs at home, winning nine of the last 10. Also, when the teams conduct home-and-home series like the one they conclude tonight, the Sabres are 7-1-2 in the games held in Buffalo.

Plus, the forecast calls for cold and snow this weekend. That return to normalcy should carry over into the series, right?

"When you lose it's no fun," Vanek said. "But I think the guys do believe we have a good team. I believe that. We're a lot better team than we're playing right now, that's for sure. Sometimes it just takes one win, get that second one to kind of feel good about your game again, just kind of know you can win again.

"That's all it takes. It takes one game, and that's what we're going to try to do."

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Pegula not ready to pull the trigger

"It's hard to evaluate something that has been torn apart the way this thing has," owner says.

Bucky Gleason
The Buffalo News
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Terry Pegula was just like any other Buffalo Sabres fan before he purchased the franchise last February. He celebrated their wins, suffered after their losses and wondered if they would ever win a Stanley Cup. His mission since buying his favorite team has been winning a title one way or another.

Pegula, on the day he was formally announced as owner, made it clear that General Manager Darcy Regier and coach Lindy Ruff were his guys when he said they "ain't going nowhere." Forty-two games into the season and seven straight road games around the corner, it doesn't look like the Sabres are going anywhere, either.

The Sabres are in 11th place in the Eastern Conference with an 18-19-5 record that's identical to where they stood at this stage last season. Their offense has been anemic for weeks, their defense has been poor, their franchise goaltender hasn't played well and their effort has been lethargic on too many nights.

Otherwise, everything is just dandy.

Pegula is a diehard fan, but not an angry one. The primary source of his frustration hasn't been the play of his team or management or coaching. It's the number of players who have landed in the medical room. He has kept a body count since the Sabres played New Jersey on Nov. 16 after getting off to an 11-6 start. Since, they have a 7-13-5 record.

"What everybody is missing is that I've been carrying around 167 man games," he said by telephone Thursday evening. "Forget about the season. I'm talking about the last 25 games. We've had 18 players go down. It's like a merry-go-round every night. You look on the ice and what are your defensive pairs tonight? Hell, who knows? Who's healthy?"

"I think what's important is the number of guys. You can have 167 man games with four, five, six guys out for a long period. Eighteen? Cut me a break. I told Darcy Regier one time, 'If I was you, I would be afraid to get on the plane.' "

In fact, Pegula pointed toward the injury bug for virtually all of the Sabres' troubles this season.

Free agent defenseman Christian Ehrhoff and forward Ville Leino were slow to adjust when healthy and have been forced to battle through injuries. Ehrhoff had a poor start but was playing better before hurting his rib. Leino wasn't productive before breaking his foot and has no points in two games since he returned.

Defenseman Robyn Regehr, whom Pegula convinced to waive a no-trade clause in his contract and climb aboard, has been inconsistent. He had a team-worst minus-12 rating under difficult conditions against the opposing teams' top lines. And then there's Brad Boyes, whose arrival confirmed Pegula was willing to pay for production.

So far, it looks more like non-production.

Boyes and his \$4 million annual salary were acquired in a trade last year with St. Louis with the idea the former 40-goal scorer would rediscover his touch in Buffalo. The move looked encouraging at the time, but he's been ineffective, if not invisible, on most nights. He has eight goals and 24 points in his first 50 games with the Sabres.

"I don't want to single out Brad," Pegula said. "Look who he plays with every night. It changes a lot. He's another guy [who was injured]. ... I have to believe we're a better hockey team than we were last year. We just didn't have this massive, catastrophic injury problem. Put yourself in anybody's place in the organization. How do you evaluate what's going on?"

The Sabres' bigger problem this season has been the play of their so-called core players, the ones Regier viewed as the cornerstones of the franchise. Most have played below their standards. Some would argue they grew too comfortable, became uninterested in playing under Ruff or are simply having poor seasons.

In truth, nobody knows for sure.

Goaltender Ryan Miller is having his worst NHL season. He has a 10-12-2 record with a 3.01 goals-against average and a .902 save percentage, both of which were 36th in the league. He's considered their franchise goalie with a \$6.25 million salary, but backup Jhonas Enroth has played better (8-7-3, 2.46 GAA, .923 SP).

Jason Pominville and Thomas Vanek both are among the NHL's top 20 scorers, but after them there's a significant dropoff. Derek Roy is third in team scoring but was 115th in the NHL with only eight goals and 24 points. Drew Stafford, who had 31 goals last season before signing a contract extension, has just seven goals and 22 points.

"They know that more than you do," Pegula said. "I hope you don't think Drew Stafford is happy with his goal production, or Derek Roy, or Ville Leino. They're pressing. They've played pretty well lately. If we get some consistency in the lineup for a period of time, I got to believe it will fall back together again."

Whatever excitement and change in culture Pegula generated with the long-suffering, passionate fan base has largely been replaced by the widespread opinion that Buffalo is a stale team that's nowhere near contention. The Sabres are 23rd in scoring, 21st in goals-against average and first in bummed out fans.

This is not what the new regime had in mind when suggesting Western New York was "hockey heaven." If hockey has become a religion, First Niagara Center has become the quietest church in

town. Toronto comes to town tonight, but Maple Leafs fans will likely be louder than the familiar moans and groans coming from the Buffalo congregation.

Regier and Ruff have had their posts since 1997 and make up the longest-tenured tandem currently in the NHL. Calls for one or both to be fired seem to be getting louder with every season, particularly this one. Neither one appears to be in trouble regardless of whether the Sabres make the playoffs.

"Trust me, I'm not trying to sugar-coat anything," Pegula said. "There's nobody in that locker room happy with the record right now and with the way the team is playing. They want to make it better. But it's hard to evaluate something that has been torn apart the way this thing has."

Since the lockout, the eighth-place team in the conference averaged nearly 91 points. The Sabres turned things around last year with a 25-11-5 record in the second half, including a 16-4-4 finish, and slipped into the playoffs with one game remaining in the regular season.

Now, they need a similar run. If recent history holds, the Sabres would need about 50 points to reach the postseason. It would mean posting a record equivalent to 23-13-4 over their final 40 games. Pegula believes it can be done, assuming the injured return, based on their 10 wins in their first 15 games.

The Sabres have a few options depending on how they want to move forward. They can start by keeping everyone in place and improving their play, but they are running out of time. They can make trades to upgrade the roster, which is difficult. They also can sell off players who don't appear to be in their future.

"My attitude now is, 'Let's put Humpty [Dumpty] back together again,' " Pegula said. "I want our players to know that I thought we had a pretty good hockey team until all this happened. Let's paste it back together and start a new season."

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All-Star nod cancels Pominville's vacation

Forward entered Thursday's games tied for 10th in the NHL with 43 points

John Vogl

The Buffalo News

January 13, 2012

Jason Pominville's usual routine during All-Star Weekend is to get away from hockey. The Sabres' captain might tune into the game or the skills competition while flipping channels, but he prefers to use the break as a time to refresh himself for the final months of the season.

Not this year.

The NHL has selected Pominville to play in this month's All-Star Game in Ottawa, while Luke Adam got the call as an All-Star Rookie on Thursday. Both players will participate in the skills competition Jan. 28, while only Pominville will play in the game Jan. 29.

"It's a pretty cool opportunity," Pominville said. "It should be a fun weekend. I'm obviously excited. I've been used to having a little bit of a break, but I guess this year will be a little different."

Pominville entered Thursday night's games tied for 10th in scoring with 43 points, including 29 assists. Adam was tied for fourth among rookies with 10 goals and ranked eighth with 20 points.

"That's pretty neat," Adam said of the selection. "To play in the NHL and then to be able to go and meet those guys and be in the skills competition, it's a lot of fun. It's an honor."

Left wing Thomas Vanek, who ranked 10th in goals (19) and was tied for 18th in points (40), was not selected.

"It doesn't matter," he said before the team was announced. "The people who know me, that's not why I play the game. I'll take the five days off."

That was normally Pominville's theory, too.

"I usually get a chance to see parts of it depending on what we've got going on, but I usually try to just relax and stay away from hockey," he said. "But it's definitely an event that I enjoy watching. It'll be pretty cool to be there and to participate in whatever I have to."

Adam, one of 12 rookies picked to join the 42 All-Stars, was an American Hockey League All-Star last season. He participated in the shooting accuracy contest but went just 3 for 8.

"I'm going to have to get in the Shooter Tutor and start working," he said.

Chicago forward and South Buffalo native Patrick Kane made the team, as did former Sabres defenseman Brian Campbell, who will make his fourth appearance.

"I've been written off a little bit sometimes by some people," said the Florida blue-liner. "This one probably means the most to me out of all of them. I love where I'm playing right now, I love the situation. It's very rewarding with all the work that I've put into it to be able to go."

...

The Sabres host the Toronto Maple Leafs tonight in First Niagara Center, the second straight meeting between the teams.

With less than two minutes to play in the Leafs' 2-0 victory Tuesday in Toronto, Buffalo forward Nathan Gerbe had a skirmish with Toronto forward Joffrey Lupul, who had his helmet knocked off by a punch. Both players earned roughing and unsportsmanlike conduct penalties.

"He said something when I was going to the bench, and I turned around and he just kind of popped me, but whatever," Lupul told Toronto reporters. "He had 58 other minutes to play hard all game, and he didn't. So it's always a thing that makes me laugh, when a guy doesn't show up for the game and then, with two minutes left, tries to make something happen."

Countered Gerbe: "I don't worry about it. My main goal is to win a game Friday. I'm going to do whatever I can to help the team. As far as the outside things that are said, it doesn't bother me. It's part of hockey."

Lupul, meanwhile, continues to tweak the city. He made a plea for "windowless rooms" at the Leafs' downtown hotel during a visit last month. Upon arriving Thursday afternoon, he snapped a picture of the rainy waterfront and tweeted, "I'm a little upset none of my Buffalo fans told me to pack my beach towel."

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Sabres fans can chime in on MSG, Time Warner dispute

T.J. Pignataro

The Buffalo News

January 13, 2012

Negotiations between Time Warner Cable and MSG Networks have advanced about as little in the last two weeks as the struggling Buffalo Sabres have in the Eastern Conference standings.

Local Time Warner subscribers hope that changes on both accounts — and soon.

For the fifth time since MSG went off of Time Warner Cable's airwaves at midnight Jan. 1, fans with Time Warner will have to seek alternatives Friday night if they want to watch their hometown hockey heroes battle cross-border rival Toronto from First Niagara Center.

That's because MSG — the New York City based regional sports network with the exclusive rights to telecast the Sabres — and Time Warner Cable remain deadlocked in negotiations over programming fees.

Time Warner officials say MSG refuses to budge off of a 53 percent hike in what the cable giant formerly paid the network under its last deal. MSG officials characterize the figure as "a gross miscalculation" but still refuse to disclose figures of their own.

Readers of The Buffalo News will have 30 minutes to question officials from both sides today. The News will hold separate online discussion forums at buffalonews.com.

Joli Plucknette-Farmen, Time Warner's communication manager for its Western New York region, [will join The News online at 10:30 a.m.](#)

Then, at 2:30 p.m., Daniel Ronayne, MSG Media's executive vice president and general manager, [will be available live for questions and comments.](#)

MSG Networks today also announced it will hold its second Sabres "viewing party" in the Buffalo area for Friday night's game beginning at 6:30 p.m. at Mr. Goodbar, 1110 Elmwood Ave.

Mr. Goodbar is one of several local establishments who have recently switched from Time Warner to Direct TV in order to continue airing the Sabres.

On Jan. 3, MSG held a viewing party at Tully's Good Times in Clarence for the Sabres' victory over Edmonton. Another Sabres-themed party was thrown in Rochester by MSG officials this past Tuesday, where the Sabres' 2-0 loss to the Maple Leafs in Toronto was shown.

Admission to Friday night's viewing party will be free but it will be on a first-come, first-served basis and is only available to patrons 21 years of age or older. MSG will provide appetizers as well as prizes and giveaways for fans.

In other news, officials from state Attorney General Eric T. Schneiderman's office said the attorney general had no updates to offer about its planned meetings this week with officials from Time Warner and MSG, as Schneiderman announced late last week.

Leafs go for home-and-home sweep of Sabres

Tal Pinchevsky

NHL.com

January 13, 2012

MAPLE LEAFS (22-15-5) at SABRES (18-19-5)

TV : TSN, MSG-**Buffalo**

LAST 10: Toronto 6-2-2; Buffalo 2-6-2.

Season Series: This is the fourth of six meetings this season between the Northeast Division rivals. After losing 5-4 in Buffalo on Dec. 16, the Leafs have won the last two meetings, including a 2-0 win in Toronto on Tuesday in which [Jonas Gustavsson](#) made 32 saves for his second shutout in three starts.

Big Story: Both Buffalo and Toronto were in the thick of the Eastern Conference playoff race a month ago but have recently gone in decidedly different directions. The Leafs are riding a four-game winning streak in which they have outscored their opponents 17-6 to move into seventh place in the East, while the Sabres have lost their last three and six of their past seven to fall to 11th.

Team Scope :

Maple Leafs: With three straight losses to close out 2011, the Leafs appeared to be falling out of the playoff hunt in the East. But they've bounced back in 2012, winning their first four games in the new year. The streak started with convincing home wins over Tampa Bay and Winnipeg before the team blew a 3-0 lead over Detroit on Saturday, only to win 4-3 on a goal by [Joffrey Lupul](#).

The Leafs were able to continue the winning trend on Tuesday when they opened up the home-and-home series with Buffalo. [Nikolai Kulemin](#) and [Mikhail Grabovski](#) scored in the first period, giving Toronto all the offense it would need. Gustavsson continued to make his claim for the Leafs' starting goaltending spot, making 14 of his 32 saves in the third period.

Sabres: After a strong start to their season, Buffalo struggled through the last month of 2011, posting a 4-7-3 record in December. 2012 hasn't been any better. After starting the new year by beating Edmonton 4-3, they lost 4-2 at Carolina and 2-1 in overtime to Winnipeg before being blanked in Toronto on Tuesday.

If any mid-January contest can be considered a must-win game, this would be the one. The Sabres hit the road after Friday night for a seven-game trip.

"We need to get one [win] and it will make the boys in here feel good and hopefully we can string them on from there," Sabres forward [Drew Stafford](#) said after the game on Tuesday.

"We've got a great opportunity in the rematch in a couple days."

Who's Hot: Gustavsson has been practically unbeatable for Toronto, going 4-0-0 in January with a 1.51 GAA and .950 save percentage. As they have most of the season, Lupul and [Phil Kessel](#) are pacing the Leafs offense with seven and four points respectively in the last four games. ... [Jason Pominville](#) has been one of the few Sabres finding the scoresheet lately, notching four points in his last four games.

Injury Report: [Tyler Bozak](#) (shoulder), [Colby Armstrong](#) (concussion-like symptoms), and [Colby Armstrong](#) (foot) are on IR for the Leafs. ... The Sabres' infirmary is a busy place, with [Thomas Vanek](#) questionable for Friday with an upper-body injury and [Derek Roy](#) (arm), [Andrej Sekera](#) (upper body), [Tyler Ennis](#) (ankle), and [Christian Ehrhoff](#) (upper body) out.

Stat Pack: Toronto will have a great opportunity to put some space between themselves and the rest of the Eastern Conference pack. Following their game in Buffalo, they will open a season-long five-game homestand in which they'll host five Eastern Conference teams. With a 12-5-4 home record that's among the best in the League, the homestand could give Toronto a big boost.

Puck Drop: The Sabres will have to improve their road play during their upcoming seven-game trip if they hope to salvage the season. Buffalo has lost seven straight on the road and, with just 34 goals in 18 road games, is tied with Anaheim for last in the League in road scoring.

Toronto (22-15-5) at Buffalo (18-19-5)

Mike Lipka

STATS

January 12, 2012

A four-game winning streak has boosted the [Toronto Maple Leafs](#)' hopes of finally reaching the playoffs for the first time since the NHL's season-long lockout in 2004-05.

A home-and-home sweep of sputtering Buffalo would hurt the Sabres' chances of joining them.

After shutting out the Sabres earlier this week, Toronto can open a 10-point advantage over its Northeast Division rival if it posts another regulation victory Friday night in Buffalo.

Seeking to bring the NHL postseason to Canada's largest city for the first time since 2004, the Maple Leafs (22-15-5) have jumped to seventh place in the Eastern Conference after sweeping a four-game homestand to begin 2012.

It's been nearly five years since they last won five in a row, although they'll have to end a three-game road skid to match that feat.

"It definitely feels like we're moving in the right direction," goalie [Jonas Gustavsson](#) said. "We're really good right now."

Gustavsson has been in net throughout the Leafs' win streak, posting a 1.51 goals-against average and two shutouts. He had 32 saves Tuesday in a 2-0 win over the Sabres, his first victory in five career starts versus Buffalo.

Toronto didn't get any points from All-Star wings [Phil Kessel](#) and [Joffrey Lupul](#) in that game, but [Nikolai Kulemin](#) finally managed to chip in. Kulemin, who scored 30 goals last season, tallied his fifth and assisted on [Mikhail Grabovski's](#) goal for his first multipoint performance in 31 contests.

He also displayed some rare physical play - which could carry over to Friday - in landing a jarring hit on Buffalo's [Patrick Kaleta](#), who earlier had gotten a charging penalty for a hit on Grabovski.

While Sabres coach Lindy Ruff lamented what he feels is an officiating bias against Kaleta, there were nothing but good feelings between Kulemin and Grabovski.

"You know, he told me he did that for me because (Kaleta) hit me before," Grabovski said. "I'm very happy for that because a Russian (stuck up) for a Russian."

Buffalo (18-19-5) is likely more concerned about scoring goals than making hits. The Sabres have averaged 1.9 goals during a 2-7-2 stretch, slipping to 11th place in the East.

Things aren't about to get any easier for Ruff's club. After Friday's matchup, the Sabres take a seven-game road losing streak into a seven-game trip, which includes visits to West contenders Detroit, Chicago and St. Louis.

First, they're thinking about getting some revenge and making up some ground on the Leafs, who have beaten Buffalo in five of the past six meetings.

"We need to get one and it will make the boys in here feel good and hopefully we can string them on from there," forward [Drew Stafford](#) said. "We've got a great opportunity in the rematch."

[Thomas Vanek](#) hopes to help produce a different result after leaving Tuesday's game early with what was first announced as an upper-body injury, then later said to be an illness. While Vanek is expected to return, [Derek Roy](#) - the subject of recent trade rumors - also could be back after missing two games with a shoulder problem.

Team ice time leader [Christian Ehrhoff](#) remains out. The defenseman's absence probably isn't helping [Ryan Miller](#), who had won 12 of 13 starts versus Toronto before posting a 3.22 GAA in losing five of his last six.

His 3.39 GAA at home is the league's worst among goalies to have started more than 10 home games.

High-priced Sabres among NHL's top flops

Associated Press

January 12, 2012

BUFFALO, N.Y. — Forward Drew Stafford sits at his stall in the Buffalo Sabres' envy-of-the-NHL, extravagantly renovated locker room attempting to keep his frustrations in check and hopes buoyed.

It's not lost on Stafford in the midst of these spare-no-expenses surroundings — the fine hardwood paneling, glossy pictures, cushy lounge, high-tech gadgetry and players with lucrative long-term contracts, including his own — that the Sabres haven't come close to fulfilling their end of the Stanley Cup-contending dream new owner Terry Pegula laid out when he took over 11 months ago.

"You're definitely disappointed. There's some frustration in here," Stafford said. "With all the changes, new players, new locker room, new ownership, all the new stuff, there's going to be high expectations. And when that doesn't work out the right way, it's tough."

For all the money spent — the \$6-plus-million Pegula paid to upgrade the players' area was nothing compared to the nearly \$140 million he committed to contracts this offseason — there have been minimal results, leaving little joy in a town that's affectionately redubbed itself "Pegulaville."

"We're staying positive. We have hope and we have belief," Stafford said. "We're not sitting in here thinking that the season's slipping away."

Not yet anyway, but time is running out.

In passing the midpoint of their season, the Sabres, as they nudge up against the NHL salary-cap, have been among the league's biggest flops.

Buffalo's 18-19-5 record entering this weekend might be exactly the same as it was a year ago before the team went on a second-half surge to secure seventh place on the final weekend of the season. And yet there have been few signs to indicate this squad is capable of duplicating that run.

Since a 10-5 start, the Sabres hadn't won consecutive games.

After hosting Toronto on Friday, the Sabres play their next seven on the road, where they've lost seven straight in regulation to match a franchise-worst skid.

Their star goalie, Ryan Miller, acknowledges he's having difficulty finding his swagger.

"It's tough when things aren't going your way to keep believing that it's going to go your way," Miller said. "I know so far this season it probably hasn't been quite the level I need to be. But I don't feel I'm too far off."

When it's not goaltending, it's the offense, which has suddenly dried up, having scored two or more goals just five times during a recent 2-6-2 stretch.

And their troubles have been compounded by a rash of injuries. Buffalo's had 18 players miss at least one game due to injury. That includes Miller missing nine games with whiplash/concussion, and star defenseman Tyler Myers missing 19 games with a broken wrist.

Things became so bad that leading goal scorer Thomas Vanek was limited to playing the first period of a 2-0 loss at Toronto on Tuesday because of an upset stomach that's likely related to food poisoning.

"It adds to the list of shake your head," coach Lindy Ruff said of Vanek's illness.

Ruff hasn't been immune from criticism. In his 14th season in Buffalo and the Sabres winningest coach, he's facing questions of whether his message has grown stale.

"I'm doing good, thanks for asking," Ruff said, when asked how he's holding up. "I stopped and got a coffee this morning on the way to the rink."

At least he's not lost his sense of humor.

"My job is to keep these guys up," Ruff said. "There's a certain level of frustration that you can see walking in the room."

This is not what anyone signed up for after the Sabres spent the offseason pulling off a series of bold moves. It began during a weeklong stretch in late June, when Buffalo acquired veteran defensemen Robyn Regehr and Christian Ehrhoff in trades, and then landed forward Ville Leino in free agency.

The expectations grew even higher in September, when the team signed Myers to a seven-year, \$38.5 million contract extension.

Those high hopes have come crashing down with a fan base that's grown anxious.

"Well, you had a reasonable expectation for the playoffs, but that's looking like a pipe dream," said John Lewandowski. He was among 2,100 fans attending a viewing party the team hosted Tuesday for Time-Warner Cable customers affected by the cable company's dispute with MSG, the Sabres' TV broadcaster.

"Fans are starting to turn," Lewandowski said. "We're wondering when (Pegula) is going to do something, and why he hasn't stepped up to do something."

Even worse, some fans are questioning the team's passion.

"The only time we saw this team have heart is when the veterans were injured and the young guys were up," Chad Thomson said. "I wouldn't mind them dumping some of the veterans."

General manager Darcy Regier can appreciate fans' concerns in light of the high hopes in September.

"I think the great thing that Terry brought are the expectations," Regier said. "We're all cognizant of it, we're all working with it, and we're trying to live up to them."

That doesn't mean he's going to act rashly.

Based on current trade talks, Regier said the marketplace for making a deal isn't yet established. He noted it's also been difficult to evaluate the Sabres immediate needs due to the number of injuries.

"I actually am more focused on where we're going than where we are. Where we've been is obvious," Regier said. "The first half has been disappointing."

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SABRES DUO HEADED TO ALL-STAR WEEKEND

Kevin Snow

Sabres.com

January 12, 2012

The NHL announced the full rosters for this year's All-Star Weekend in Ottawa, and two Sabres will be headed to Canada's capital at the end of January. [Jason Pominville](#) was among the 36 players named to the All-Star Game lineup, and [Luke Adam](#) was one of 12 rookies selected to participate in the Skills Competition.

The All-Star Game takes place on Sunday, January 29 (4 p.m.), while the Skills Competition is January 28 at 7 p.m. Scotiabank Place will host both events.

"It's a pretty cool opportunity, should be a fun weekend," Pominville said today following practice. "I'm obviously excited. I've been used to having a little bit of a break, but I guess this year will be a little different."

The All-Star Game selection continues a whirlwind season for Pominville, who was named Buffalo's captain during the team's trip to Europe in October. He leads the Sabres in scoring with 14 goals and 43 points in 42 games, which is also good for 11th in league scoring.

Adam was on the ice taking part in a photo shoot when the rosters were announced this afternoon. He was unaware of his selection until being greeted by reporters on his way into the locker room.

"I'm pretty excited, that's pretty neat," said a beaming Adam. "To play in the NHL, and now go to the All-Star Game and meet those guys ... it's going to be an honor."

Adam will only take part in Saturday's skills event, and already has an idea of which competition he might want to avoid.

"Last year in the AHL All-Star Game I did Accuracy Shooting -- but only went three-for-eight. Maybe I'll do that, but I'm going to have to get into the shooter tutor before I go."

[Thomas Vanek](#) returned to the ice today after missing Wednesday's practice with a bout of food poisoning he contracted in Toronto on Monday. He still wasn't feeling 100 percent today.

"It felt good to be out there and get a sweat. I'm just a little weak from not eating. Hopefully get some food and electrolytes and feel better tomorrow."

Vanek tried to play through his illness, but only lasted six shifts during the opening period of Buffalo's 2-0 loss to the Maple Leafs.

“To be honest, after the first period I don’t even remember my shifts. I felt weak and dizzy, and just got to the point where I couldn’t help out my team anymore.”

Today’s practice was streamed live on sabres.com, and head coach Lindy Ruff was mic’d up throughout the entire 40 minutes. He tried not to let it affect his normal approach on the ice.

“I don’t think you completely forget about it. A little different obviously,” Ruff explained. “We really wanted to get an up-tempo practice and really get the legs driving today. I thought with the special teams practice mixed into the middle of it, we got what we wanted.”

Leafs tilting rivalry in their favor

Bill Hoppe

Niagara Gazette

January 13, 2012

BUFFALO — This is unusual. Traditionally, the roles have been reversed, with the slick Sabres leading the feeble Toronto Maple Leafs in the Eastern Conference standings.

The Sabres have finished above the Leafs, playoff bystanders since 2004, every post-lockout season. In fact, on this date for the past six years the Leafs have only been within four points of the Sabres twice.

The times are changing, though.

The reeling Sabres, losers of three straight and nine of 11, woke up this morning in 11th place, eight points behind the surging, seventh-place Leafs, winners of their last four entering tonight's tilt at the First Niagara Center.

The Sabres, once 29-9-1 against the Leafs following the lockout, have lost five of six to their closest and fiercest Northeast Division rival, including a 2-0 setback Tuesday in Toronto.

These days, the speedy Leafs pile up goals (132, fifth overall, 3.1 a game), while the Sabres (105, 23rd, 2.5) can't score.

Another four-point triumph by the Leafs tonight would kick the Sabres further into the abyss and almost out of the playoff chase.

"We're not used to being in this situation," Sabres captain Jason Pominville, who was named an NHL All-Star on Thursday, said following practice.

What's ignited the Leafs' resurgence? For starters, they finally possess elite talent and depth, two important components they severely lacked for years.

Their top line — Phil Kessel, former Sabre Tim Connolly and Joffrey Lupul — is one of the NHL's best.

Kessel (24 goals and 48 points) and Lupul (19 and 47) rank second and fifth in league scoring. The power play, which has goals in five straight games, is third overall.

"Kessel and Lupul are having career years, and they've found some chemistry up there that's really working for them," Sabres winger Drew Stafford said. "The rest of the team has fed off

that. They've picked up their speed, I think. They're a lot faster, quicker on the attack than they have been in the past.

“I think if I had to pick one thing, it would probably be they're a lot quicker team now.”

Brian Burke has continually added pieces — big and small — throughout his four seasons in Toronto.

The general manager gave Boston a bounty for Kessel during the 2009 offseason, and then pulled another blockbuster with Calgary two seasons ago, acquiring captain and defense all-star Dion Phaneuf. Ex-Sabre Clarke MacArthur signed in 2010 after Atlanta dumped him. Lupul came in a lopsided deal with Anaheim last year.

Connolly and Matt Lombardi arrived during the summer. Now the Leafs boast three scoring lines.

Sabres coach Lindy Ruff said playmaking is the Leafs' greatest strength.

“Adding a Lombardi in there and even a Tim Connolly with a little bit of creativity has been able to open up some guys,” he said. “So those top three lines are probably difference-makers.”

Is it odd looking up and seeing the Leafs ahead?

“It just goes to show you how close the league is,” Stafford said. “Teams are making changes, and it's working out for them. Obviously, seeing teams like that up there, it doesn't make it any easier for us.”

Of course, the Leafs are hardly a perfect club. Their penalty killing ranks last. Despite Jonas Gustavsson's shutout Tuesday, they're allowing 3.1 goals a game (24th).

Still, the newfound success should have the FNC roaring again tonight. In their last visit Dec. 16, a 5-4 Sabres win, Leafs supporters comprised possibly more than half of the 18,690 fans. The crowd was arguably the most raucous in years as both factions tried to outdo each other.

“The rivalry is always there,” Leafs defenseman Luke Schenn said. “Any time you play division games over time, it is always a good rivalry. What makes it extra special is how many fans we have down there in Buffalo, especially on Friday night. (It's) pretty cool to go in there and have half the building as Leafs fans.”

Stafford said he loves playing in that wild atmosphere.

“It gets intense,” he said. “Those are usually the best games crowd-wise, atmosphere-wise we have all year. It’s still there. Obviously, now I think the stakes are a little bit higher because they’re ahead of us and we’re trying to catch them.”

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Sabres winger Thomas Vanek (possible food poisoning) practiced Thursday and should play tonight.

Meanwhile, Ruff said defenseman Andrej Sekera (upper body) could return in a week or less. Defenseman Christian Ehrhoff (upper body) is a little behind Sekera’s timetable.

Both have been practicing.

Ruff also said winger Tyler Ennis (ankle sprain) felt better for the first time Thursday.

“It feels like it’s closer to getting back on the ice,” Ruff said.

Pominville selected to All-Star team

Bill Hoppe

Niagara Gazette

January 13, 2012

BUFFALO — Sabres captain Jason Pominville has historically started slowly each season before catching fire in the second half and posting some big numbers.

This year, however, he roared out of the gate. Through 42 games, the winger has 14 goals and 42 points, putting him 11th in NHL scoring.

On Thursday, Pominville's hot start earned him a spot on the NHL All-Star team. The game is Jan. 29 at Scotiabank Place in Ottawa.

The first-time honor was sweet for Pominville, who played 235 AHL games and once cleared waivers.

"I have come from pretty far," Pominville said inside the First Niagara Center. "It hasn't been easy. I had to battle to get to where I am. But I think it was worth the bus rides in the minors and the long trips."

Linemate Thomas Vanek, who has 19 goals (10th) and 40 points (19th) wasn't selected.

"It doesn't matter," Vanek said before the announcement. "The people that know me, that's not why I play the game. I'll take the five days off."

Meanwhile, forward Luke Adam, who has 10 goals (fourth among rookies) was named an All-Star rookie. He'll participate in the skills competition.

As an AHL All-Star last season, Adam hit three of eight targets in the shooting accuracy.

"I'm going to have to get the Shooter Tutor and start working," an excited Adam said.

Pominville an All-Star

Paul Hamilton

WGR 550

January 12, 2012

Buffalo, NY (WGR 550) -- Sabres Captain Jason Pominville has been chosen by the league to participate in the 2012 NHL All-Star game. Pominville is the lone Sabre representative, although Luke Adam will skate with the Young All-Stars.

Pominville has 14 goals and 43 points in 42 games this season. He's 10th in the NHL in scoring and leads the Sabres.

Sabres Captain Jason Pominville has been chosen by the league to participate in the 2012 NHL All-Star game. Pominville is the lone Sabre representative, although Luke Adam will skate with the Young All-Stars.

Pominville has 14 goals and 43 points in 42 games this season. He's 10th in the NHL in scoring and leads the Sabres.

The Captain said, "It's a pretty cool opportunity and it should be a fun weekend."

The Sabres put Pominville on waivers in 2005 to send him back to Rochester. He had already played three seasons down there and it wasn't looking good for a NHL career. Pominville didn't pout and scored 19 goals in 18 games and came back to Buffalo for good, "I have come pretty far. It hasn't been easy, I had to battle to get to where I am, but I think it was worth the bus rides in the minors and the long trips and to finally make it and be in the NHL and now to be able to participate in an event like that will be a pretty unique opportunity."

Thomas Vanek has 19 goals and is 10th in the league, but he didn't make it. That surprises his linemate, "I am surprised, I thought Thomas was deserving to be there. He might still go and he's definitely deserving to go and I'm surprised he's not on the list."

Vanek himself doesn't crave honors like that, "It doesn't matter, people that know me know that's not why I play the game and I'll take the five days off too."

Vanek returned to practice feeling weak because he hadn't eaten in two days, but liked getting out there and sweating it out.

Lindy Ruff felt both should've made it. "I think both guys up front, they've worked well together and they both have very good years going."

Luke Adam will be in the skills competition and he couldn't be happier, "I'm pretty excited, that's pretty neat. The NHL All Star Game, wow. To play in the NHL and to be able to go and meet those guys and be in the skills competition it's going to be a lot of fun, it's an honor."

Adam had to have thought about if he had numbers that would get him selected. He said, "It had been brought up, but the last month hasn't gone the way I would've liked it to go, but fortunately enough I got selected and it will be a lot of fun."

Friday night's opponent will be well represented at the exhibition game. Toronto had forwards Joffrey Lupul and Phil Kessel added to the list with defenseman Dion Phaneuf.

The captains for the All-Star game will be named later this month with a Fantasy Draft to determine the teams on January 26th.

Tyler Ennis finally seems to be heading in the right direction with his high ankle sprain and Ruff said he's feeling better.

Andrej Sekera still is not doing competing drills so he may have to wait until after the weekend to play.

Zack Kassian's return provides spark to Rochester Amerks

Kevin Oklobzija

Rochester Democrat & Chronicle

January 13, 2012

Here's a suggestion to opponents — and their fans — when the Rochester Americans come to town:

Don't give Zack Kassian any added motivation to excel.

And here's a suggestion to Kassian when it comes to goal celebrations:

Before actually taking center stage following a goal, practice the latest brainstorm in front of a mirror first.

Kassian scored one of the bigger goals of the Amerks' season on Sunday evening, tying the score 3-3 against the Hershey Bears with 61 seconds remaining as Rochester salvaged an important point in the standings.

Then came what may have been the worst post-goal display of emotion of the Amerk season.

As Kassian skated through the right circle toward the blue line, he hunched forward at maybe a 30-degree angle, spread his arms wide open and then brought them forward, almost as though he was about to hug a sequoia.

At the same time his jubilant teammates were celebrating the extra-attacker goal by their rookie right winger, they were trying to figure out just what he was doing.

It was part construction crane claw-bucket, part wild animal.

"I don't know what it was," said right winger Derek Whitmore, who was near Kassian.

"We think," coach Ron Rolston said, "it was a bear."

And so, a nickname may have just been born. Grizzly, Yogi, Papa Kass, something. But no way his teammates let him forget it.

Kassian said the inspiration came earlier in the game, when, during a broadcast timeout, he noticed a fan was holding a stuffed bear up against the glass. He knew right then and there that if he scored a goal, he would go Gentle Ben.

"I don't think it worked too well," he admitted. "It didn't really look like a bear."

There was no questioning the goal or his determined play, however. Returned on Saturday by the Buffalo Sabres after a six-week recall to the NHL, Kassian produced two goals and an assist against the Bears and was the only Amerk to score in the shootout.

The celebration was just Kassian being himself and enjoying the moment.

"You definitely have to have fun," he said. "We work hard for the whole game to score goals and win. We didn't start out very well (down 2-0 and being outshot 36-6 late in the second period) but you have to give credit to the guys, they kept working."

Kassian, who turns 21 in 11 days, played 18 games for the Sabres during his callup. He scored 3 goals, 3 assists and 6 points and had 13 penalty minutes. As an Amerk he has scored 9-9-18 in 20 games.

He knows there are parts of his game that must still improve, and said he will work with assistant coach Chris Taylor and the other coaches to get better.

One area is body positioning. "Getting inside guys," he said. "It's so hard to score goals up there and just getting inside guys and getting to the net."

Consistently using his size and strength (he's 6-foot-3, 228 pounds) is also an area that needs some improvement. He can't be physical imposing on the wall one night and on the perimeter the next.

Rolston said there must be consistency in "doing the things he needs to do at that level to be a power forward."

The goal celebration could use a little work, too.

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Leafs snipers Joffrey Lupul, Phil Kessel cut out the middle man

Damien Cox
Toronto Star
January 13, 2012

It's an unorthodox bit of chemistry, to be sure.

Standard hockey thinking suggests a smart, resourceful centre is required to make any line work and to make good scoring wingers score. Someone has to get shooters the puck in a position to shoot, and without such a player, it's frustration and under-production all around.

So how to explain the all-stars, Phil Kessel and Joffrey Lupul?

Along with Maple Leafs captain Dion Phaneuf, Kessel and Lupul have been invited to play in the NHL all-star game later this month in Ottawa which, depending on your point-of-view, is either a tremendous honour or an offshoot of an anachronistic event mired in pre-dot.com thinking.

But I think we'd all agree the three Leafs are pretty darn good, yes?

With Phaneuf, there are those who don't like his style of game and might agree with the "overrated" tag *Sports Illustrated* has hung on him. But with Lupul and Kessel, there's simply no arguing with the numbers; as of Thursday, Kessel was second in the NHL in scoring, while Lupul was fifth.

It's hard to say which of those is more surprising. Lupul, probably, given that he was a throw-in last winter when the Leafs went hunting for either Jake Gardiner or Justin Schultz in a deal with the Anaheim Ducks. The Ducks wanted to keep Schultz, the Leafs were more than happy with Gardiner and willing to accept Lupul and his contract as part of the transaction.

Nobody thought Lupul would do what he has done. Then again, nobody thought he was a left winger, being a right-hand shot and all, and his switch to the left side has seen him take off as an NHL scorer.

But Kessel has also surprised, partly because few view him as more than a goal-scorer, and partly because of the aforementioned absence of a playmaking centre to set him up. Get him somebody along the lines of Marc Savard, his centre in Boston, and the thinking went that he would really take off.

Tyler Bozak has been tried in that role and found wanting, and Tim Connolly has played there when healthy with decent results.

But rather than being unable to produce, Kessel has soared. Why? Well, part of the answer may lie in the fact that he *plays* like a centre himself, and therefore isn't nearly as desperate for an assist expert beside him to create offence.

Watch him. Sometimes he goes solo. But also watch how many times he gains the zone, creates space for himself and others with his speed, then draws defenders towards him to produce open ice. His on-ice vision is underrated as is his passing ability, which is why his 24 goals are matched by 24 assists.

In effect, he is Lupul's set up man, and with 28 assists himself, Lupul has done a fine job of being the architect of many setups for Kessel.

Rather than being in desperate need of a centre, as conventional wisdom would suggest, Kessel and Lupul seem to have bypassed the middle man and taken care of dishing off to each other for the 43 goals they have scored, 33 per cent of their team's goal total.

Perhaps they'd be even more productive with a top-notch centre; perhaps not.

They've been collaborating for about a year now, ever since Lupul arrived from Anaheim, but still have a ways to go to be considered anywhere near the best Leaf scoring combination of the post-expansion era. As a poll on thestar.com showed, fans still have a soft spot for their memories of Darryl Sitter working with Lanny McDonald in the 1970s, and Doug Gilmour skating alongside Dave Andreychuk in the 1990s.

The good news for the current Leafs is the consistency of the two players. Kessel hasn't gone more than one game without a point, and the longest he's gone without scoring a goal has been six games. Lupul hasn't gone more than four games without scoring a goal.

Tuesday's victory over Buffalo, a game that didn't include a point from either Kessel or Lupul, saw the Leafs' second line centred by Mikhail Grabovski spring to life with a goal from Grabovski and one from Nik Kulemin. If that line can get going, it might relieve the checking pressure on the Lupul-Kessel combination, which to this point has drawn the top enemy checkers all season.

If players like Grabovski, Kulemin, Clarke MacArthur and even Nazem Kadri can start contributing more, in theory there might be room for Kessel and Lupul to have an even bigger second half.

With or without a centre.

Toronto Maple Leafs' Jonas Gustavsson guns for five in a row

Kevin McGran

Toronto Star

January 13, 2012

The *Star's* Kevin McGran asks five questions in advance of the Leafs-Sabres game Friday night in Buffalo.

1. Jonas Gustavsson has won four in a row, can he make it five? Even coach Ron Wilson said Thursday he had no idea when James Reimer would play again, Gustavsson is that hot.
2. How do the Leafs new all-stars do? Joffrey Lupul and Phil Kessel each had scoring streaks ended in Tuesday's 2-0 win. Both were named to the all-star lineups on Thursday, so maybe they can start new scoring streaks.
3. Can Nikolai Kulemin get on track? The Russian had his second two-point night on Tuesday and looked like his old, physical self against Buffalo. Maybe another solid game against the Sabres can lift his confidence.
4. Will it be Miller Time or Miller Lite? Sabres goalie Ryan Miller has had the Leafs number through the years, but Toronto seems to be turning the tide on the celebrated goalie. And his home numbers are awful.
5. What's the crowd's effect? Lot's of Leaf fans pile over that border, making for a fabulous atmosphere and sometimes "Go Leafs Go" trumps "Let's Go Buffalo."

Leafs steer through the wreckage

Steve Simmons

Toronto Sun

January 13, 2012

You know this hockey season is going Brian Burke's way when all he has to get upset about these days is this silly voting that named Dion Phaneuf the most overrated player in the NHL.

He doesn't have to find a goalie and some able defencemen, the way Steve Yzerman must in Tampa.

He doesn't have to unravel the layers of slop that has become the entangled embarrassment in two languages known as the Montreal Canadiens.

He doesn't have to worry, day to day, when or if Sidney Crosby will be back and how far the Pittsburgh Penguins will be behind when and if he eventually gets to play.

He doesn't have to try and make sense of what has become of the great Ryan Miller and the Buffalo Sabres, the NHL's latest tribute to overspending and under-achieving.

Nope, the hockey world is unfolding just right for the Toronto Maple Leafs in a season where making the playoffs is no longer a question but a destination.

There is really only one way the Leafs don't make the playoffs in the Eastern Conference this season: And that's if they implode themselves.

All around them, though, there is implosion. There have been few seasons like this one, with messed up teams more the norm than the exception in the East.

Yzerman's view of the conference goes like this: You put the New York Rangers, the Boston Bruins and the Philadelphia Flyers in one category — and put a blanket over just about every other team. Now let them fight it out for the other playoffs spots.

I agree with Yzerman on the Rangers and the Bruins, especially considering how well Henrik Lundqvist has played in goal in New York and the kind of leadership they had received from coach John Tortorella. The Bruins are the Stanley Cup champions and look like they have a chance to repeat.

Philadelphia, I'm not so sure about anymore, although the Flyers will be a playoff team. Ilya Bryzgalov has not been the goalie the Flyers expected to him to be in the first year of a life-long contract in Philadelphia. And with Chris Pronger out, that makes the Flyers all the more vulnerable, even with a possible Hart Trophy season from Claude Giroux.

So there is Boston and New York in the East as contenders. And then what?

Kevin Dineen's Florida Panthers are all smoke and mirrors. They will find their level eventually and they can't possibly keep doing what they're doing. Oddly enough, should the Panthers win their division and the Leafs finish 6th in the standings, the most unlikely of playoff matchups between the two longest serving drought teams would occur. That's a series the Leafs could win, even without adding whatever it is Burke plans to add in the coming weeks.

This year began with the Leafs' ability to make the playoffs in doubt. Now, the possibility of them winning a round is not out of the question — especially if they end up playing the Panthers.

The Panthers, actually, are in more peril than the Leafs because of the somewhat improved state of the Washington Capitals. Not that the Capitals have improved much under new coach, Dale Hunter. They're just not playing as terribly as they were under Bruce Boudreau. Should the Caps find their legs in the second half of the season — and some even slight interest in playing — they would wind up first in the Southeast Division, and that could place the Panthers in jeopardy of making the post-season.

As of Thursday, Florida was just one point up on the Leafs. There are only seven points between fifth and 10th in the conference, but again, an advantage the Leafs didn't have in previous Ron Wilson seasons was they are not well behind and have to climb over teams in a league that allows three-point games to get to where they need to go.

So let's pencil in Boston, New York and Philadelphia in the playoffs, and somebody from the Southeast Division.

There's half your post-season teams. And in a battle with the surprising Ottawa Senators, Pittsburgh without Crosby, Winnipeg, which can't win on the road, and always pesky New Jersey Devils, the opportunity is there for the Leafs, like it hasn't been in years.

The playoffs aren't just a possibility this season.

The opportunity hasn't been this rich in years.