



Buffalo Sabres

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If Sabres complete postseason charge, it will be historic

Mike Harrington

The Buffalo News

March 12, 2012

The Buffalo Sabres continue their own form of March Madness tonight as the Montreal Canadiens come to First Niagara Center. It will be Buffalo's seventh game in 12 days this month. After Wednesday's visit by Colorado, the Sabres finally get their first two-day rest in March in advance of a key trip to Florida this weekend.

The Sabres stole a quick breather Sunday by taking the day off in the wake of Saturday's 4-3 shootout win in Ottawa. The status of injured players Thomas Vanek, Matt Ellis and Patrick Kaleta, as well as the flu-ridden Andrej Sekera, will be updated today.

The Sabres have 13 games left and have 72 points, four behind eighth-place Washington in the Eastern Conference. They have survived their toughest road test of the season to get back in the race and the question now is if they can continue to sustain their push.

The Sabres were 12-8-0 in their first 20 games before slumping to just 9-16-5 in the next 30. But they have bounced back to go 11-5-3 in the segment of games 51-70, which wraps up tonight against the Habs, who are coming off a 4-1 win Saturday in Vancouver.

The Sabres made a late playoff push last year, going 16-4-4 in the final 24 games. But what they're doing this year, trying to come from last in the East and 10 points out on Feb. 17, would be downright historic.

No team has ever come from last place in a conference in February to make the postseason under the current format, and the only team to overcome a 10-point deficit from any position in February was the 1994 New York Islanders.

The Isles were 10 back on Feb. 18, 1994 and managed to finish eighth in the East by one point over Florida but had nothing left for the playoffs. They were swept by the eventual Stanley Cup champion New York Rangers and were outscored, 22-3.

The Sabres, of course, hope to make the playoffs -- and have something left to cause trouble in a potential first-round series against either the Rangers or hard-charging Pittsburgh. But they have to get there.

One issue for them is that it's hard to figure out exactly who they're chasing. The Southeast Division winner gets the No. 3 seed but the division leader has been flip-flopping between Florida, Washington and Winnipeg. If the Sabres could pass them all and "win the Southeast," they would be assured of getting in but that will be tough.

The Sabres have a big Southern trip that opens Saturday night in Florida and goes Monday to Tampa Bay. And they still have tough roadies against the Rangers, Washington, Philadelphia and

Boston, the latter two to close the season. They are going to lose a tiebreaker to anyone based on a low total of regulation plus overtime wins, so they have to finish at least one point ahead.

Buffalo's schedule is a tough one, but there are similar challenges for everyone else in the race as well. Here's a look at the other contenders for eighth:

- Florida (77 points, 14 games left): The Panthers continue to be the Southeast favorite and the odds-on choice for third as they try to snap a playoff drought that dates to 2000 and is the NHL's longest. They have road games left at Philadelphia and Detroit and things will likely get decided when they host Winnipeg and play at Washington on April 3 and 5.

- Washington (76 points, 13 games left): The Caps blanked Toronto, 2-0, Sunday after pulling out a big win Saturday in Boston. They just completed a rugged five-game homestand where they went 2-0-1 in games they trailed late in regulation. But they start a five-game road trip Tuesday on Long Island and the rest of the trip is brutal. (Winnipeg, Chicago, Detroit and Philadelphia). They still have another game in Boston and play the season finale April 7 in Madison Square Garden.

- Winnipeg (72 points, 13 games left): A lot of observers think the Jets are just paper tigers because of their incredible home-ice advantage at cozy MTS Centre. They have the biggest home-road disparity in the East (21-10-4 vs. 11-19-4) and that's a problem because seven of their final 10 games are on the road. Pittsburgh, Washington, Nashville, Tampa Bay and Florida are all on the itinerary.

The Sabres could have helped themselves head to head but went just 1-2-1 against the Jets this year -- while Winnipeg was going 3-0-1 against Buffalo. Pretty big four-point difference.

- Tampa Bay (69 points, 14 games left): The Lightning, remember, were a game away from the Stanley Cup final last year and have the runaway goal scoring leader this season in Steven Stamkos. A problem that won't go away is their goaltending, which is last in the NHL. They're 0-2-1 in the last three but in the midst of seven straight at home and better do damage. That's because they finish with six of eight on the road.

- Toronto (68 points, 13 games left): The Leafs are 2-12-2 in their last 16 games after Sunday's loss. They've fired their coach, replacing Ron Wilson with Randy Carlyle. Their fan base is just about in revolt because the team hasn't made the playoffs since the lockout. Their defense has underachieved and their goaltending has struggled. They still have trips to Florida, Tampa, Boston and Ottawa left, as well as visits from the Flyers and Rangers. They're toast.

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Foligno's first is huge in Sabres triumph

Rookie's first NHL goal part of rare offensive explosion on road as Tyler Ennis' goal caps shootout triumph

Mike Harrington

The Buffalo News

March 11, 2012

OTTAWA — Marcus Foligno didn't know whether it was the time to do his dad's trademark goal jump, but the Buffalo Sabres rookie sure knew he had lifted his whole team when it desperately needed a boost.

Foligno's first NHL goal single-handedly got the Sabres even with 5:54 left and Buffalo survived to pull out a 4-3 shootout victory Saturday night over the Ottawa Senators at Scotiabank Place.

The Sabres came back to tie the game three times and won the shootout, 2-1, thanks to goals by Jason Pominville and Tyler Ennis and a spectacular pad save by Ryan Miller against Ottawa star Jason Spezza.

The Sabres improved to 8-2-1 in their last 11 games and remained two points behind Washington in the battle for eighth place in the Eastern Conference. Buffalo pulled even with idle Winnipeg at 72 points while pushing further ahead of Tampa Bay (69) and Toronto (68).

None of it would have been possible without the effort by Foligno, playing in just his second NHL game to replace the injured Thomas Vanek.

Ottawa had taken a 3-2 lead with 12:46 left on the second goal of the game by Erik Karlsson, the NHL's leader in points by defensemen. It looked like the Sabres might come up empty for the third straight time on the road in games that were tied through 40 minutes.

But Foligno, who had four hits in an active performance, chased down a loose puck and outmuscled veteran defenseman Sergei Gonchar to the ice behind the Ottawa net as the crowd of 19,951 howled for a penalty that wasn't called. Foligno scooped up the puck and lifted a short back-hander that ricocheted off Daniel Alfredsson and beat Sens goalie Ben Bishop.

"It was better timing than anything. Hard work paid off there," said Foligno, who has 14 goals this year in Rochester. "I got a lucky bounce and I was really happy to tie the game up for the guys and really happy to contribute. I was hoping I could score. Whenever you could contribute like that, it's huge."

"That's as big as they come in this kind of stretch for us," said Miller.

On the Ottawa bench at the time was Foligno's older brother, Nick. Buffalo coach Lindy Ruff challenged his player prior to the morning skate to be "the best Foligno on the ice" and the top Sabres' prospect answered the call.

Nick Foligno's reaction to the goal: "I was happy and [ticked] off at the same time."

In the locker room afterward, Marcus Foligno mugged for photographers with the retrieved puck and sported the golden helmet the Sabres give to their player of the game.

The sidebar to the goal was the fact that veteran NHL observers and keen fans noticed Foligno didn't do the two-footed stomp his father, Mike, made famous while playing in the '80s and '90s for the Sabres and Toronto.

Turns out Marcus didn't know the goal was actually his.

"It was one of those nightmares where I actually thought of my Dad's jump," Marcus said. "What if it went off someone else? I thought Stafford actually hit it. So I guess I'll save the jump for when I'm in Buffalo because the fans will like to see it live."

Sabres fans had to like what Foligno added to an offense that had 41 shots on goal and much more sustained offensive play than in recent road games.

The Sabres had the first eight shots in the game and held a 10-1 advantage when Erik Condra took advantage of a Tyler Myers miscue to score on a short-handed breakaway at 8:27 of the first period.

But they rallied for the first time as Nathan Gerbe tied it at 9:28 of the second on a quick snap shot off a Derek Roy feed with defenseman Christian Ehrhoff moving up on the play to set a screen.

Karlsson banked a shot from below the goal line off Miller's elbow at 11:42 of the period to make it 2-1 but the Sabres drew even again on Ennis' goal with 18 seconds left in the period, a spectacular backhand after a headlong dive to beat the 6-foot-7 Bishop to a Jordan Leopold rebound.

"I kind of just had to dive and whack at it," said Ennis, who moved back to center between Foligno and Stafford. "I saw the goalie down and if I had waited, he would have got it."

Karlsson put the Senators in front for a third time but the Sabres were undaunted and got back to square one thanks to Foligno.

"Any kid is going to remember his first goal and it was a big one for us," Ruff said.

"We were down three times, came back three and won a shootout. That felt good," Ennis said. "It shows real character for our team to battle back."

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More injuries thin out forward ranks

Vanek sits out, Ellis and Kaleta both banged up in win over Ottawa

Mike Harrington

The Buffalo News

March 11, 2012

OTTAWA — The Buffalo Sabres suddenly appear thin at forward as Thomas Vanek missed Saturday's shootout win over the Ottawa Senators while Matt Ellis and Patrick Kaleta were injured during the game and could not finish.

Ellis appears to be the most seriously injured. He limped to the dressing room with a left leg injury early in the third period.

"Matty doesn't look good. I think the news on Matty is going to be bad," coach Lindy Ruff said glumly after the game. "Initially, it looks like it's going to be some time."

Vanek has an undisclosed upper-body injury in the wake of the crunching check he took late in Thursday's game from Boston defenseman Johnny Boychuk. He missed practice here Friday and did no workouts Saturday as well. Ruff had been saying Vanek was day to day but admitted after Saturday's win that the team's second-leading goal scorer might miss a few games.

"Not good. He couldn't exercise today," Ruff said. "He was too tender to do anything. I would say he's doubtful for Monday [when Montreal comes to First Niagara Center]. I was hoping he would get on the ice but couldn't. I was even hoping for an off-ice workout and he couldn't do that. Once you spend three or four days off, it's tough to jump right back in."

Vanek denied earlier this week that he was dealing with lingering shoulder problems from a similar hard hit he took last month from Montreal's Erik Cole. The Boychuk hit was a similar straight-on hit.

Kaleta sat out Friday's practice here and Saturday's optional morning skate for maintenance on a sore neck and seemed to be bothered by it again during the game. The winger played just five minutes, 10 seconds overall and none in the third period.

Defenseman Andrej Sekera, who was not on the trip, missed his third straight game with the flu and was replaced in the lineup by Alexander Sulzer.

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The trade deadline showed that rookie Marcus Foligno's status is clearly growing in the Sabres' prospect chain. When Zack Kassian was dealt to Vancouver, Buffalo general manager Darcy Regier said one reason the Sabres weren't fretting over trading the physical winger was that they had physical players in Rochester like Foligno and defenseman Brayden McNabb.

"Kassian has size and skill and he's a whole package," Foligno said prior to the game. "We fed off each other playing together and I learned a lot with him. It's great to hear those words from Darcy. I just have to keep going with what I've been doing in Rochester and keep growing as a player."

Foligno said there was plenty of shock in the Amerks dressing room when word of the Kassian trade filtered down to the farm.

"I was shocked, but Cody [Hodgson] and Kass are both great players and sometimes that's how it goes down," Foligno said. "We didn't see it coming because Zack was playing pretty well but it is what it is and you just have to move on. That's the hockey business."

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Without Vanek, the Sabres shuffled their lines pretty much the way they were in practice Friday. That meant that Hodgson was centering the top line between Ville Leino and Jason Pominville.

Tyler Ennis went back to the middle between Foligno and Drew Stafford while Derek Roy moved down between Nathan Gerbe and Brad Boyes. The fourth line had Ellis centering Corey Tropp and Kaleta.

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Hodgson hopes practice makes perfect

Mike Harrington

The Buffalo News

March 10, 2012

OTTAWA -- Eleven days after he joined the Buffalo Sabres, Cody Hodgson finally got the chance to practice with the team Friday.

The 22-year-old center has played six games since being acquired from Vancouver at the trade deadline but his travel combined with the team's truncated schedule has meant that his only workouts have been light skates the morning of the game.

Friday's 45-minute session at the Bell SensPlex, in fact, was the Sabres' first real practice since Feb. 28 in Anaheim.

"It's nice to get more familiar with things," Hodgson admitted. "Obviously, we're in playoff mode right now and trying to do everything we can to win games. I've felt more comfortable each day as we've been going here but it's nice to get at least one practice in."

Hodgson has no points in six games with the Sabres and had just two goals in his final 13 games with the Canucks after entering February with 14. He had a plus-1 rating in each of his first three games but a minus-1 in each of the next three.

"I always think I can improve," he said. "There are certain areas I've looked it but I'm happy to be here trying to help a team win. It's not for lack of effort that I haven't scored yet but it obviously would be nice to start to contribute offensively."

After working between Tyler Ennis and Drew Stafford since he arrived, Hodgson was centering Ville Leino and Jason Pominville in practice Friday but it's unclear if those lines will stay intact for tonight's game against the Ottawa Senators.

Hodgson has had 12 shots on goal in the six games and is encouraged by that part of his play.

"If you're not getting chances, that's when you worry and I've had some," he said. "Our line created quite a few and with any luck, would have been able to contribute a goal or two. That's the way the game goes sometimes. Maybe you get one perhaps you didn't deserve so it evens out."

* * * *

Patrick Kaleta sat out practice for what coach Lindy Ruff termed maintenance on a stiff neck and should be OK tonight. The news on defenseman Andrej Sekera, however, got worse Friday.

Sekera stayed home from Boston with what the team termed flu-like symptoms and was unable to come here for this end of the trip.

"He's going for more tests," Ruff said. "He's either got a real severe flu or we're trying to figure it out what it is but he's not feeling well."

Alexander Sulzer will again be in the lineup tonight in Sekera's place.

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Ryan Miller on Jhonas Enroth's play Thursday in Boston, the first time in 22 games the Buffalo starter had not appeared: "It's always nice to get a bit of a break and see Jhonas go in and give us a nice game. I thought he battled really hard."

Ruff on Enroth: "I don't think Jhonas made any mistakes in the game. He gave us a couple big saves. ... You always worry when a goaltender doesn't play but he gave us a chance to win. I think we let him down."

Rookie goaltender Ben Bishop is expected to get his third straight start tonight for Ottawa. The 6-foot-7 Bishop, acquired from St. Louis at the trade deadline, has won his first two, including Thursday's 4-1 victory here over the New York Rangers.

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Sabres return home to host Canadiens

Brian Compton

NHL.com

March 11, 2012

CANADIENS (27-32-10) at SABRES (32-29-8)

TV: RDS (HD), TSN, MSG-B

Last 10: Montreal 3-7-0; Buffalo 7-2-1.

Season Series: This is the fourth of six meetings between the Northeast Division rivals. Buffalo is 3-0-1 against the Canadiens this season.

Big Story: [Andrei Markov](#) is back.

Montreal's top defenseman made a surprise return to the lineup Saturday night, leading the Canadiens to an impressive 4-1 win at Vancouver. It was the first appearance in nearly 16 months for Markov, who has been hampered by knee injuries.

"It was awesome, we just beat one of the strongest teams in the League," Markov said after finishing with 17:09 of ice time. "I felt good. The first few shifts, I had to adjust to the speed, but after that I felt good. It's going to take some time. I need a little bit more time to realize the speed of the game and to read the game."

Team Scope:

Canadiens: It was a 1-1 tie after 40 minutes, but Montreal pulled away with three third-period goals to beat the Canucks at Rogers Arena. [Carey Price](#) finished with 32 saves and [Erik Cole](#) scored twice for the Habs, who are now just a point shy of climbing out of the Eastern Conference basement.

"We knew they were going to come out pretty hard in this building but we just kind of put up a barricade and didn't let them get in the inside," Price said.

Sabres: After suffering a disappointing 3-1 loss at Boston on Thursday night, Buffalo concluded its brief two-game trip with a 4-3 shootout victory at Ottawa on Saturday. [Marcus Foligno](#) tied the game for the Sabres in the third period before [Tyler Ennis](#) tallied the game-winner in the shootout to help Buffalo keep pace in the race to the postseason.

"It was good to see us get pucks to the net, and we got a couple of nice bounces and that comes

from just putting the puck in good areas," Sabres goalie [Ryan Miller](#) said. "They all count and they were a little bit dirtier. We needed it."

Who's Hot: Cole has 3 goals in his last two games for the Habs, while [Max Pacioretty](#) has 5 goals and 5 assists in his last five contests. ... Ennis has a pair of goals in his last five games for Buffalo.

Injury Report: Montreal center [David Desharnais](#) missed his first game of the season Saturday night with a lower-body injury. The Canadiens are also expected to be without Marhieu Darche (upper body), [Travis Moen](#) (upper body), [Michael Blunden](#) (knee), [Brian Gionta](#) (torn biceps) and [Raphael Diaz](#) (lower body). ... Sabres winger [Patrick Kaleta](#) (neck) and defenseman [Andrej Sekera](#) (flu) are day-to-day, while [Thomas Vanek](#) (upper body) is doubtful. [Matt Ellis](#) (lower body) and [Jochen Hecht](#) (concussion) are out.

Stat Pack: [Blake Geoffrion](#), a fourth-generation member of the Canadiens, scored his first goal with the club Saturday night.

Puck Drop: "When he's healthy, he's top-three among the best defensemen in the League. When he comes back, it's a boost of confidence for our team. It's pretty amazing to see a guy like that (come back), but it's great to be able to learn from him and be out there on the power play with him. He's an unbelievable passer." -- *Canadiens defenseman* [P.K. Subban](#) on [Andrej Markov](#)

Sabres top Senators 4-3 in shootout

Erin Nicks

NHL.com

March 10, 2012

KANATA, Ont. -- Just as they've been doing in the race for a playoff berth, the [Buffalo Sabres](#) spent Saturday night playing catch-up.

Happily for the Sabres' playoff hopes, they caught -- and passed -- the [Ottawa Senators](#).

[Tyler Ennis](#) scored in regulation and got the winner in the shootout as the Sabres gave their playoff chances a boost with a 4-3 victory at Scotiabank Place.

"I think it shows a lot of character from our team that we were able to battle back," Ennis said. "Now we just gotta move forward."

After Ottawa's [Daniel Alfredsson](#) scored in the first half of the third round to tie the shootout, Ennis came in on [Ben Bishop](#), deked once and snapped a forehand past him to give the Sabres a victory after they overcame three one-goal deficits to get the game past 60 minutes.

The win gave the Sabres 72 points, the same as ninth-place Winnipeg -- both teams trail eighth-place Washington by two points, though the Caps have a game in hand on both teams.

The single point gave the seventh-place Senators 81, two behind sixth-place New Jersey.

"We'll take what we can get tonight," coach Paul MacLean said. "We worked real hard; we got a point. We'll move on."

[Nathan Gerbe](#) and [Marcus Foligno](#) also had goals for Buffalo, while [Erik Karlsson](#) scored twice and [Erik Condra](#) once for the Senators, who led three times but couldn't put away the visitors.

"We played well in the third," Buffalo coach Lindy Ruff said. "We had a little trouble in the second, but we came back to our game and capitalized on our opportunities. I like what the lines did. I thought Ville (Leino) had a heck of a game up there with (Cody) Hodgson and (Jason) Pominville."

Bishop, making his third consecutive start for Ottawa in the absence of injured starter [Craig Anderson](#), stopped a season-high 38 saves. [Ryan Miller](#) made 33 saves for Buffalo.

The Senators grabbed a 3-2 lead at 7:14 of the third period when Karlsson, the NHL's scoring leader among defensemen, fired home his 18th of the season. But Foligno, whose older brother Nick plays for Ottawa, got his first NHL goal with 5:54 left in regulation when his shot from the left corner banked off Alfredsson's ankle and went over Bishop's shoulder.

Ruff had said on Saturday morning that he hoped Marcus would be "the best Foligno on the ice."

"I don't know if my brother wants to hear this, but I think (I was)," [Marcus Foligno](#) said with a laugh. "Nick played well tonight but I was just fortunate to get that bounce."

Foligno made the split-second decision not to do the jump made famous by his father, Mike.

"It was one of those nightmares – I thought about my dad's jump," he said. "I thought (Drew) Stafford hit it, so I'll save the jump for Sabres fans because they'll want to see it live."

Ottawa opened the scoring with a shorthanded goal 8:27 into the first period. [Milan Michalek](#) was serving an interference penalty when Condra raced down the middle of the ice on a breakaway and wristed a shot through Miller's five-hole. It was Condra's first goal in 30 games -- four out of his eight goals this season have come against the Sabres.

Condra nearly got his second of the night halfway through the second, when [Jordan Leopold](#) gave the puck away just after a faceoff to the right of Miller. Condra pounced on the puck and tried to stuff it under Miller's blocker but was denied.

The Sabres then tied the game at 9:28, when [Christian Ehrhoff](#) passed the puck to [Derek Roy](#) from the half-boards, then skated to the front of the net. Roy then passed to Gerbe, whose shot from the high slot beat a screened Bishop. It was Gerbe's first goal in 16 games.

Ottawa went back in front at 11:42 when [Chris Neil](#)'s shot was cleared to the corner by Roy and picked up by Karlsson, whose sharp-angled shot from the right corner tipped off Miller's left shoulder and went into the net.

Buffalo maintained pressure in the Senators' zone late in the second and tied it with 19 seconds left in the period. Leino passed to Leopold, who took a one-timer from the point. The shot hit Ottawa defenseman [Filip Kuba](#) in front of the net; Ennis dove for it and backhanded the puck past a sprawling Bishop.

Karlsson put Ottawa ahead for the third time when he picked off a clearing attempt by [Mike Weber](#) at the Sabres' blue line and wired a shot under the arm of Miller, who was clearly frustrated after the goal.

Buffalo's [Matt Ellis](#) left early in the third period with a lower-body injury and did not return. [Patrick Kaleta](#) also left midway through the second.

"I think the news on Matty is going to be bad," Ruff said. "I think he's going to be (out) some time. Kaleta's nursing his neck and it got too stiff to play." Ruff also added that forward [Thomas Vanek](#), injured on Thursday, was "too tender" and couldn't exercise. He is doubtful for Monday's game against Montreal.

Montreal (27-32-10) at Buffalo (32-29-8)

Nicolino DiBenedetto

STATS

The [Buffalo Sabres](#)' last meeting with the [Montreal Canadiens](#) left coach Lindy Ruff feeling "embarrassed."

His team's play - and position in the Eastern Conference playoff race - since then has likely changed that dramatically.

The Sabres look to continue their impressive turnaround and close the gap on a playoff position Monday night when they face the Canadiens at First Niagara Center.

Buffalo (32-29-8) fell 4-3 in a shootout to Montreal (27-32-10) at home Feb. 17, and Ruff said he felt "disappointed" and "embarrassed" after his team dropped into a tie for last place in the East.

A lot has changed since.

The Sabres are 8-2-1 since that visit from the Canadiens, climbing into a tie for ninth with Winnipeg, four points behind Washington for the eighth and final playoff spot.

Buffalo's surge continued with Saturday's 4-3 shootout win at Ottawa, as [Tyler Ennis](#) netted the decisive goal in the tiebreaker after scoring in regulation. The Sabres finished with 41 shots on goal through overtime, a major improvement from the 20 they registered in Thursday's 3-1 loss at Boston.

"It was good to see us get pucks to the net, and we got a couple of nice bounces and that comes from just putting the puck in good areas," said [Ryan Miller](#), who had 33 saves against the Senators. "They all count and they were a little bit dirtier. We needed it."

Miller, who will likely be in net, has been perhaps the biggest reason for the Sabres' turnaround, going 8-1-1 with a 1.76 goals-against average. However, he struggled in the latest meeting with Montreal, making 16 saves before getting beat on both shootout attempts. He had won his previous four starts against the Northeast Division rival behind a 0.75 GAA and one shutout.

[Jason Pominville](#) has two goals and one assist in the last three games and converted in the shootout Saturday. The Buffalo captain was held without a point by Montreal last month after getting two goals and two assists in the previous four home matchups.

The Canadiens are at the bottom of the East, but enter this meeting with momentum of their own. They followed a 5-3 win at Edmonton on Thursday with a 4-1 victory at Vancouver two days later.

"It was awesome," defenseman [Andrei Markov](#) said. "We just beat one of the strongest teams in the league."

Markov's presence provided the Canadiens with a lift after the veteran defenseman missed 133 games over two seasons due to two operations on his right knee.

Goaltender [Carey Price](#) feels Markov's return may continue paying dividends.

"He's a first-class player and he moves the puck so well," Price said. "When we're breaking the puck out, he just has the confidence with it, and it makes a big difference. He's a big boost for us and he's pretty irreplaceable."

Price will likely get the chance to improve upon his own strong effort, making 32 saves Saturday after enduring a 2-7-1 stretch with a 3.27 GAA. That includes 27 saves with two more in the shootout against the Sabres last month.

He's had success in Buffalo, going 4-0-2 with a 1.77 GAA in his last six games.

Ennis, Sabres happy to scrape by with 4-3 win

The Canadian Press

March 10, 2012

OTTAWA - It was hardly a perfect game, but at the end of the night all the [Buffalo Sabres](#) cared about was walking away with two points.

[Tyler Ennis](#) scored in regulation then had the shootout winner as the Sabres defeated the [Ottawa Senators](#) 4-3 Saturday night.

"It was good to see us get pucks to the net and we got a couple of nice bounces and that comes from just putting the puck in good areas," said [Ryan Miller](#), who stopped 33 shots to earn the win in net. "They all count and they were a little bit dirtier Saturday and we needed it."

Buffalo (32-29-8) is pushing for the eighth and final playoff spot in the Eastern Conference with just 13 games remaining in the regular season.

[Nathan Gerbe](#) and [Marcus Foligno](#) also scored for the Sabres, who moved into a tie for ninth with the [Winnipeg Jets](#). The two teams have identical records after 69 games, and are just two points back of eighth-place Washington.

[Erik Karlsson](#) scored twice and [Erik Condra](#) also scored for the Senators (36-26-8), while [Ben Bishop](#) made 38 saves.

"Overall I think we played a good game," said Karlsson. "Miller played a really good game and probably saved them a couple of times and I think we could have come away with two points."

The Sabres trailed throughout the game and were forced to come back three different times before finally winning in the shootout.

Miller stopped [Milan Michalek](#) and [Jason Spezza](#) in the shootout.

[Daniel Alfredsson](#) was the lone shootout scorer for Ottawa, but it wasn't enough as both [Jason Pominville](#) and Ennis scored for Buffalo.

The Senators played the final 67 seconds of overtime shorthanded after Karlsson took a tripping penalty. Bishop made two great saves forcing the game to a shootout.

Karlsson gave the Senators a 3-2 lead at the seven-minute mark of the third as he took advantage of a turnover just inside the blue-line and fired a wristshot past Miller to make it 3-2.

Marcus Foligno tied the game 3-3 with his first NHL goal as his backhander deflected off Alfredsson's foot and past Bishop.

Marcus admitted he would have liked to celebrate a bit more, including the Foligno leap first done by his father Mike, but since he wasn't exactly sure who would get credit for the goal he restrained himself.

"It was just one of those questionable goals," said Marcus. "I'm just really happy to get it in my second NHL game and contribute the tying goal. There were a lot of emotions that's for sure."

Older brother Nick, a forward with the Ottawa Senators, also had mixed emotions.

"I didn't really know how to react," said Nick. "I was happy and pissed off at the same time. Now that the game's over I can say I'm really thrilled for him."

Just prior to his goal Marcus got tangled with Ottawa's [Sergei Gonchar](#) and the Senators Paul MacLean was disappointed that no call was made on the play.

"I thought it was a slew foot that led to him getting an opportunity to the puck," said MacLean. "All in all it was a good game and very entertaining and we just have to move on."

Marcus' first NHL game was also against the Senators.

The Senators threw 21 shots at Miller in the second, but after 40 minutes the game was tied 2-2.

"Miller made some great stops to keep them in the game and they got the better of us in the shootout," said Alfredsson. "I thought we played pretty good."

The Sabres tied it 1-1 as Gerbe was able to take advantage of a screened Bishop. Ottawa then regained the lead midway through the period on Karlsson's 17th of the season. Miller attempted to stop Karlsson's sharp angle shot, but instead the puck bounced off his shoulder and into the net.

Karlsson's performance was even more impressive, considering he had been a game-time decision as he struggles with the wear-and-tear of the long NHL season.

With 18.6 seconds remaining in the first period, Ennis tied the game as he grabbed a rebound and raised it over a sprawled Bishop.

"I thought Miller played a pretty good game and made some big saves on the goal line," said Bishop. "It's a little disappointing, but it's a big point at the end of the season."

The Senators took a 1-0 lead on Condra's short-handed goal, his first in 30 games. Condra took advantage of a turnover at the Senators blue-line and broke in alone on Miller and beat him with a quick wristshot.

The two teams split the season series with three wins each.

Notes: The Senators were without G [Craig Anderson](#) (finger, indefinitely), C [Peter Regin](#) (shoulder, out for season), C [Jesse Winchester](#) (concussion, indefinitely). D [Matt Carkner](#), RW [Bobby Butler](#) and C [Zenon Konopka](#) were a healthy scratch. The Sabres were without D [Andrej Sekera](#) (flu, day-to-day), C [Jochen Hecht](#) (concussion, out indefinitely), LW [Thomas Vanek](#) (upper body, day-to-day). C [Cody McCormick](#) was a healthy scratch.

OH, BROTHER!

Kevin Snow

Sabres.com

March 10, 2012

KANATA, ONTARIO – Lindy Ruff wanted [Marcus Foligno](#) to be “the best Foligno on the ice” tonight, and that’s exactly what happened.

Foligno’s first career NHL goal tied the game in the third period, and [Tyler Ennis](#) scored the shootout winner, as Buffalo came from behind three different times to defeat the Ottawa Senators 4-3 in front of 19,951 at Scotiabank Place.

The Sabres are 7-2-1 in their last 10 games, and are now tied at 72 points (32-29-8) with Winnipeg for 9th place in the Eastern Conference.

With the Sabres trailing 3-2, Foligno chased down Sergei Gonchar behind the Senators net and used his big frame to muscle the veteran Ottawa defenseman off the puck. Foligno corralled the puck, spun to the right side and fired a shot at the Ottawa net that caromed off a Senators defenseman before arcing over goaltender Ben Bishop.

“It was just one of those where it was better timing than anything,” said Foligno. “Hard work paid off there and I got a lucky bounce. I was really happy to tie the game up for the guys. I just really wanted to contribute tonight. I was hoping I’d score tonight. When you contribute like that it’s huge.”

Playing in just his second career NHL game, it was also the second time that Foligno had faced his brother Nick and the Senators – the first coming on December 19 of this season, also in Ottawa. Foligno was recalled Friday on an emergency basis from Rochester for the third time in a week, after making separate trips to both Vancouver and Winnipeg in the past seven days.

When asked after the game if he’d succeeded in following Ruff’s pre-game directive, Marcus seized the moment to one-up older brother Nick.

“I don’t know if my brother wants to hear this, but I think so,” Nick said with a smile. “I told him I’d have more points than him. It was just one of those things where Lindy told me that before I stepped out for the morning skate. Nick played hard tonight too, but I was just fortunate to get that bounce.”

Buffalo took the first eight shots of the game, but a costly gaffe by [Tyler Myers](#) on the power play led to Ottawa’s first goal. The six-foot-eight Myers jumped up at the Senators blueline to keep the puck in, but he was unable to control it. Erik Condra jumped on the loose puck and raced in untouched for the unassisted shorthanded tally at 8:27.

It took until 9:28 of the second for Buffalo to get on the board, thanks to the hard work of [Christian Ehrhoff](#). He started the rush in the Buffalo end and continued up ice all the way to the front of the crease. [Derek Roy](#) moved down the left side and slid a pass to [Nathan Gerbe](#) in the high slot, and his quick shot got past Bishop who couldn’t see through the Ehrhoff screen.

Ottawa regained the lead at 11:42 when Erik Karlsson’s shot from behind the icing line in the Sabres corner took an unfortunate bounce off Miller’s left arm into the net. Despite being outshot 21-13 in the second period, [Tyler Ennis](#) sent the Sabres to the dressing room all even when he outworked Filip Kuba in front of the Senators net and buried a diving backhand shot with just 18 seconds left on the clock.

Karlsson, the NHL's top scoring defenseman, added to his totals with his second of the game 7:14 into the third. [Mike Weber](#) fired a clearing pass up the middle of the ice that Karlsson intercepted at the blueline, and he fired a wrist shot that snuck through Miller for his 18th of the season.

[Ryan Miller](#) made 33 saves to earn the victory, including stopping 20 of 21 Ottawa shots in the second period.

FIRST PERIOD

1-0 OTT: Condra scored on a shorthanded breakaway after Myers lost control at the Ottawa blueline. (8:27)... Shots: BUF-12, OTT-7

SECOND PERIOD

1-1: Gerbe with a quick shot from the high slot off a pass from Roy while Ehrhoff screened Bishop in front. (9:28)... 2-1 OTT: Karlsson's shot from behind the net bounces in off Miller's left arm. (11:42)... 2-2: [Tyler Ennis](#) dove past Filip Kuba to backhand the puck into the open net. (19:42) ... Shots: OTT-21, BUF-13

THIRD PERIOD

3-2 OTT: Karlsson gets his second of the game with a shot that snuck through Miller after a Weber giveaway (7:14)... 3-3: [Marcus Foligno](#) banks the puck off an Ottawa player and past Bishop for his first career goal. (14:06) ... Shots: BUF-12, OTT-7

OVERTIME

No scoring... Shots: BUF-4, OTT-1

SABRES NOTES: [Matt Ellis](#) left the game in the third period with an apparent leg injury. Ruff said afterwards that Ellis wasn't doing well, and is expected to miss some time... [Patrick Kaleta](#) only played 5:10, and didn't take a shift in the third period due to the recurrence of a neck injury that has nagged him for the past two seasons... [Thomas Vanek](#) (upper body), [Cody McCormick](#) (healthy) and [Andrej Sekera](#) (flu) were Buffalo's scratches... Vanek wasn't able to skate or workout on Saturday, and Ruff said it's unlikely that he'll play on Monday when the Sabres host Montreal at First Niagara Center.

Three star selections

1st: RYAN MILLER
2nd: BEN BISHOP
3rd: ERIK KARLSSON

Winning Goaltender

Ryan Miller

Losing Goaltender

Ben Bishop

Sabres newcomer Sulzer enjoying role as seventh defender

Bill Hoppe

Niagara Gazette

March 11, 2012

BUFFALO — It was instantly better. Upon his arrival from Vancouver on Feb. 27, Alexander Sulzer went from the Canucks' eighth defenseman to the Sabres' seventh.

Yes, the German was still a spare part. But moving up one slot made him that much closer to playing, something he had only done *12 times* in Vancouver all season. Sulzer was a healthy scratch an incredible *51 times*.

"Obviously, since there are only seven defensemen, if something happens where a coach is unhappy with a guy the way he plays, I'm in right away instead of having to sit out and wait for seven D," Sulzer said Wednesday inside the First Niagara Center.

And if the Sabres' brittle defensive corps suffered another injury, the 27-year-old would play.

About eight hours after Sulzer spoke Wednesday, he was a surprise addition to the lineup. Andrej Sekera had come down with a bad case of the flu.

So far, Sulzer's played four games with the Sabres, including the last three, averaging 17:57 a contest, mostly beside fellow countryman Christian Ehrhoff.

Sulzer could skate again tonight when the Sabres host the Montreal Canadiens.

By now, three full years into his NHL career, Sulzer (pronounced ZUHLT-ser) has learned to deal with sitting. He's never played more than 40 games in a campaign and only 78 total.

"I always play like 30, 40 games maybe," he said. "I wouldn't say I'm used to it now. I know how to handle it better. I know how to stay positive. I just work hard every day. I'm still one of the 700 players who play in the NHL, which is definitely not a bad thing. It could be quite worse."

Defensemen possess so much athleticism these days many can be partnered with anyone. Sulzer's quietly slid into the lineup and skated beside the slick Ehrhoff, a \$10 million defender.

It could already be considered a top tandem. Sulzer played 22:08 in Saturday's 4-3 shootout win over Ottawa.

"He's kind of a stay-at-home defenseman, make a good first pass, solid one-on-one player," Ehrhoff said about Sulzer last week. "He can bring some offensive upside, too."

Sabres coach Lindy Ruff added: "(Sulzer's) a good depth defenseman, mobile, a good puck mover."

Ehrhoff, Sulzer's teammate and roommate at the 2010 Vancouver Olympics, called playing with him "predictable."

"You know what he's going to do," Ehrhoff said. "He's going to defend very good. I thought he played a very good game (last) Saturday."

Sulzer's Buffalo debut last Saturday in Vancouver, his first game since Jan. 15, made him feel comfortable quickly.

"That was great," Sulzer said. "It was a really good feeling, especially playing against my old team, and then having a big game and (a 5-3) win was really good for me and for the team."

The 92nd overall pick by Nashville in 2003, Sulzer was part of an incredible draft class in which the Predators nabbed defense stars Ryan Suter, Shea Weber and regular Kevin Klein.

Sulzer spent five years in the DEL, Germany's top league, and then came to North America in 2007.

He played 53 games with the Predators, who traded him to Florida last season to make room for Jonathon Blum. However, Sulzer appeared only nine times with the Panthers.

He knew playing time could be sparse when he signed with a stacked Vancouver club.

"It was not really surprising," he said. "When I signed, they told me I was going to fight for a roster spot in camp. So it was pretty much expected that if I make the team I don't play every game."

Sulzer's at a crossroads now. He's an unrestricted free agent following the season. If he keeps performing well, he could draw interest during the summer and crack someone's top six.

He's already impressed the Sabres more than Marc-Andre Gagnani, the extra defender he was swapped for at the deadline.

"I signed with Vancouver, and it's another fresh start and another chance to establish myself as a top six defenseman in the league," Sulzer said. "I'm still working on it. I'm definitely in a good position here."

Sabres Down Senators 4-3 In Shootout

WGR 550

March 10, 2012

Kanata, ON, Canada (WGR 550) -- The Buffalo Sabres overcame 3 one-goal deficits to defeat the Ottawa Senators 4-3 in a shootout on Saturday night at Scotiabank Place.

Erik Condra gave the Sens a 1-0 lead on a shorthanded goal. Condra was able to take the puck away at his own blue line and beat Tyler Myers back for a breakaway. Ryan Miller could not stop the shot, and with Milan Michalek in the box Ottawa took the lead. That was the lone goal of the period.

The Sabres outshot Ottawa 12-7, but Ben Bishop was able to turn away all of the blue and gold's chances. Jason Pominville took the only Sabres' penalty in the opening frame. The captain was called for slashing in the defensive zone.

Miller used his pads to stop a pair of high quality chances that came just moments apart. A Senator forward broke through the Buffalo defense for the first opportunity, while Miller stretched his right pad to block Condra's attempt.

Bishop never saw Nathan Gerbe's shot from the slot and he evened up the game 1-1 in the middle stanza. Christian Ehrhoff pinched on the play and drew the screen at the top of the crease, along with two Ottawa defensemen. Erik Karlsson scored just minutes later and gave the Sens a 2-1 lead midway through the second. The rear guard threw the puck at the net from the corner and it banked off of Miller's arm to go across the line.

Tyler Ennis scored with just :18.6 to go in the middle frame to even the game at 2-2. Ville Leino and Jordan Leopold worked to move the puck around the offensive zone and feed Ennis, who beat a sprawling Bishop to re-tie the game late.

Karlsson capitalized on a Sabres' turnover in the own zone to net his second goal of the game. Mike Weber tried passing the puck through the slot to Cody Hodgson and it went off of his skates and right to the Sens' blue liner. Karlsson blasted the shot off of Miller and into the goal for the 3-2 Ottawa lead.

Marcus Foligno scored his first NHL goal thanks to a bounce off of Daniel Alfredsson's skate. The rookie tried passing the puck to the front of the net where Drew Stafford was driving hard, but it sailed over Bishop and trickled across the goal line. Neither team scored the rest of the way, and despite a Karlsson minor in OT the score remained 3-3 in the shootout.

Miller stopped the first two shooters that he faced in the shootout, while Bishop stopped Brad Boyes but Pominville scored to give Buffalo a lead. Daniel Alfredsson answered to keep the game going, but Ennis' shootout goal was the game winner and gave Buffalo a 4-3 win.

Thomas Vanek missed the game due to an upper body injury suffered on Thursday against the Boston Bruins. Foligno took Vanek's spot as a result. Foligno was paired with Ennis and Drew Stafford. The

other offensive lines include: Ville Leino-Cody Hodgson-Pominville, Nathan Gerbe-Derek Roy-Brad Boyes and Corey Tropp-Matt Ellis-Patrick Kaleta.

The Sabres host the Montreal Canadiens on Monday night at 7 o'clock on the flagship home of the Sabres Radio Network - WGR Sports Radio 550. Pregame coverage with Mike Schopp and the Bulldog begins at 6 p.m.

Goals

First Period

8:27 - (OTT) Erik Condra (8) SHG, (unassisted)

Second Period

9:28 - (BUF) Nathan Gerbe (8), (Christian Ehrhoff, Derek Roy)

11:42 - (OTT) Erik Karlsson (17), (Chris Neil, Nick Foligno)

19:41 - (BUF) Tyler Ennis (8), (Jordan Leopold, Ville Leino)

Third Period

7:14 - (OTT) Erik Karlsson (18), (unassisted)

14:06- (BUF) Marcus Foligno (1), (unassisted)

Overtime

none

Shootout

(OTT) Milan Michalek - No Goal

(BUF) Brad Boyes - No Goal

(OTT) Jason Spezza - No Goal

(BUF) Jason Pominville - Goal

(OTT) Daniel Alfredsson - Goal

(BUF) Tyler Ennis - Game-winning Goal

Penalties

Fist Period

6:46 - (OTT) Milan Michalek (2 min, interference)

16:19 - (BUF) Jason Pominville (2 min, slashing)

Second Period

none

Third Period

8:37 - (OTT) Milan Michalek (2 min, high sticking)

Overtime

3:53 - (OTT) Erik Karlsson (2 min, tripping)

3:53 - (OTT) Erik Karlsson (2 min, unsportsmanlike conduct)

Shots on Goal

BUF - 41, OTT - 36

Power Plays

BUF - 0 for 3

OTT - 0 for 1

Goaltender Saves

Ryan Miller (BUF) - 33 for 36

Ben Bishop (OTT) - 38 for 41

Three Stars

1. Ryan Miller
2. Ben Bishop
3. Erik Karlsson

Attendance

19,951

Amerks top Binghamton for fourth straight win

Will Cleveland

Rochester Democrat & Chronicle

March 11, 2012

Rochester's Joe Finley dropped his gloves with Binghamton's Tim Conboy just three seconds into Saturday's American Hockey League game. Finley got the takedown.

And with that, the tone was set. The Rochester Americans, with six different goal scorers, cruised to a 6-1 win over the Binghamton Senators at the Blue Cross Arena at the Rochester Community War Memorial.

"I think that shows the character of our team," said Rochester center Travis Turnbull after Finley fought Conboy, who had been tormenting Turnbull and the Amerks the night before. "You want to stick up for your teammates and I think he showed that right off the bat by tossing his mitts there. We weren't going to let them run around like that and play that kind of style tonight."

Rochester (30-22-6-3) has now won seven of its last eight games, including four straight. Binghamton is 24-34-2-2.

The newly formed line of Turnbull, Maxime Legault and Mark Voakes sparked the Amerks. Turnbull finished with one goal and two assists, Legault added one goal and one assist and Voakes chipped in three assists.

"The key to their line was they were getting pucks in and working down low," Rochester coach Ron Rolston said. "We wanted to put pressure on them in their own zone. That's exactly what that line does. It was a great kick-start for us."

With Marcus Foligno getting called up to Buffalo, Turnbull, Legault and Voakes were placed together during Friday's third period.

"We have a lot of different things going on our line," Turnbull said. "Max is real physical, we have a lot of speed, and I try to be physical myself. 'Voakesy' has a lot of skill. Sometimes when you get a little bit of everything, you just gel. Tonight we did, so hopefully we can continue to do that."

Rochester took a 2-0 lead in the first period and added four more in the second. Legault opened the scoring after a great forecheck by Voakes created a turnover behind the Binghamton net. Shaone Morrisonn made it 2-0 later in the first.

Turnbull scored to open the second. Derek Whitmore scored, his 25th of the season, after a scrum in front of the net. Alex Biega broke free and scored top-shelf. And then Paul Szczechura scored on a 2-on-1 short-handed break after a pass from Legault.

Canadiens can spoil Sabres' playoff run

Buffalo is four points out of eighth place

Pat Hickey

Montreal Gazette

March 12, 2012

The Canadiens' recent surge and the return of defenceman Andrei Markov have arrived too late to salvage any dreams of a playoff appearance.

But the Canadiens are in a position to play the spoiler role Monday night when they face the Buffalo Sabres at First Niagara Center (7 p.m., RDS, TSN Radio-990).

The Sabres have been struggling for most of the season but they have pulled a page of last season's playbook to make a run for the playoffs. A year ago, they came from 11 points out over the final 30 games of the season and finished seventh in the Eastern Conference with 96 points.

The Canadiens were still in position to make a playoff run when they beat the Sabres 4-3 in a shootout here on Feb. 17. The Canadiens were in 11th place and five points out of a playoff spot while the loss dropped the Sabres into a tie with Carolina for last place in the East.

Sabres coach Lindy Ruff described the situation as "embarrassing."

The Canadiens and the Sabres have gone in opposite directions since that night. Montreal is 3-7, thanks to its most recent wins in Edmonton and Vancouver, and it's 12 points behind eighth-place Washington with 13 games to play.

The Sabres are 8-2-1 and have crept into a tie for ninth place with Winnipeg, four points behind Washington, all with 13 games to play.

Neither the Canadiens nor the Sabres practised Sunday, but the day of rest was more restful for the Sabres, who flew home Saturday night after a 4-3 shootout win in Ottawa.

The Canadiens spent most of the day travelling from Vancouver, where they beat the Canucks 4-1. They not only lost three hours travelling from the West Coast but there was another hour tacked on with the arrival of daylight time.

The one advantage the Canadiens may have going into Monday's game is that they may be healthier than the Sabres. That's something they haven't been able to say going into most of their games this season. While centre David Desharnais has joined Travis Moen, Mathieu Darche and Mike Blunden on the sidelines, Markov's return gave the Canadiens a boost in Vancouver.

Coach Randy Cunneyworth said he plans to ease the veteran defenceman back into the lineup, but P.K. Subban and Josh Gorges were the only Canadiens defencemen with more ice time than Markov Saturday night.

The Sabres lost defenceman Matt Ellis Saturday night. He limped off with a lower-body injury and Ruff told reporters after the game that it appeared serious.

Patrick Kaleta also left the game, which wasn't a surprise because he has been dealing with a neck injury. He didn't practice Friday and was a game-time decision after skipping the morning skate Saturday.

Thomas Vanek, the team's secondleading scorer behind Jason Pominville, missed Saturday's game and is doubtful for Monday. He suffered an upper-body injury when he took a crunching check from Boston defenceman Johnny Boychuk on Thursday. He hasn't practised since.

"Not good. He couldn't exercise today," Ruff said after the win in Ottawa. " He was too tender to do anything. I would say he's doubtful for Monday. I was hoping he would get on the ice but (he) couldn't. I was even hoping for an off-ice workout and he couldn't do that. Once you spend three or four days off, it's tough to jump right back in."

Vanek's problems may predate the Boychuk hit. He had shoulder problems after the Canadiens' Erik Cole rocked him in that Feb. 17 game.

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Andrei Markov back with a bang

Red Fisher

Montreal Gazette

March 12, 2012

MONTREAL - I'm guessing a lot of good folks finally had something to cheer about on Sunday when they awoke to the news their Canadiens had handled the Vancouver Canucks 4-1 in the 69th game of what has been little better than a pathetic season.

Why not, eh?

It came at the expense of a slumping team, but so what? It's true the two points weren't enough to lift this under-achieving team out of the Eastern Conference cellar with only 13 games remaining in the regular season. However, teams play to win, and this one came without the services of points leader David Desharnais, who watched from the seats with an upper-body injury.

Blake Geoffrion scored his first goal in more than a year. Carey Price was right for the first time in a long time.

The winning goal was scored by Erik Cole with the first of his two only 13 seconds into the third period, one in which the Canadiens outshot the Canucks 18-11 and out-chanced them 12-2.

Most importantly, Andrei Markov was a force in his first game of the season. He was on the ice for two Canadiens goals and logged 17:09. How sweet is that?

"We just beat one of the strongest teams in the League," Markov told reporters after the game. "The first few shifts, I had to adjust to the speed, but after that I felt good. It's going to take some time. I need a little bit more time to realize the speed of the game and to read the game."

The Canadiens have won only 27 of their 69 games (only Anaheim, Edmonton and Columbus have won fewer), so they deserve to be where they are. In other words, the best they can hope for is to compete in their remaining games – something that has been sadly missing on too many nights this season. On the other hand, Canadiens fans can only hope Markov's impressive debut against a Canucks team that has won only twice in its last seven games is a positive sign.

I like Markov. Always have, but signing him to a three-year contract after two major knee surgeries was a mistake. At best, it was a major risk. And frankly, I'm surprised the Canadiens decided to use him so late in a losing season where everything points to making the playoffs becoming an impossible dream. Obviously, he wouldn't be playing unless Markov's doctors felt he had recovered completely from his surgeries.

Markov played in only 45 regular-season games in 2009-10, along with four games at the Vancouver Olympics and eight in the playoffs. Last season: only seven regular-season games. In other words, you'd expect his first game back would be a lot more difficult physically and mentally than Markov said it was.

None among us can begin to imagine what Markov has gone through. There's the pain, the anxiety and the punishing work involved in a lengthy rehab. It goes beyond that, though.

The first reaction from teammates is how sorry they are to lose a player of that calibre. The second, to a man, is that the team has other players who can "step up".

The real pain the injured player suffers is that in hardly no time at all, he no longer feels he's part of the team – and often that's the worst pain of all. He no longer can come to games while he's in rehab. The longer the absence, the greater the pain.

In Markov's case, in view of two major surgeries to the same knee, only he has any idea of its extent. There's no limit to it for quality players, which Markov surely is.

What I'm saying is that in his case, when he insists he "felt good" after a few shifts against the Canucks, the hope is that it could be the macho in Markov talking. A long time will pass before he can be the player he once was.

Welcome back, Brother Andrei.

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Feel-good moments ease pain of a tough season

Jack Todd

Montreal Gazette

March 12, 2012

MONTREAL - It was a feel-good moment at the tag end of a feel-bad season. Make that a series of feel-good moments. Take your pick:

Young Blake Geoffrion, who is purebred CH for generations, picks up his first goal for the Canadiens. Somewhere up there, Boom-Boom is smiling.

The downtrodden Canadiens, who began their trip out west in a tussle for next-to-last in the NHL with Edmonton, greased the Oilers and crunched the high-flying Canucks.

Max Pacioretty, who gave the Canadiens the worst of many scares they've endured in the past 15 years, scoring his 30th goal of the season against Edmonton, a year to the day after Zdeno Chara tried to make him part of the stanchion at the Bell Centre.

Then Andrei Markov (the long-missing and much-maligned Markov, who became a target of so-called "fans" simply because he was injured) makes a comeback in Vancouver, picks up an assist and (most importantly) finishes the game with his knee intact.

It doesn't come much sweeter than that. Unless you're in contention for a playoff berth, of course, but when your season went south before the end of February, the most you can hope for is the next-best thing: some feel-good moments to send players and fans home for the off-season in the hope that better things lie ahead.

I still can't watch Markov on the ice without cringing. I wish the Canadiens had held him back for next season – but the guy clearly wants to play and after what he's been through, who can blame him?

Even a rusty Markov is better than no Markov at all. You can see that in the deft passes, the way he timed his pass perfectly for P.K. Subban's goal on the 5-on-3. Markov is a pivotal player and the fans on the idiot boards who have been putting him down all year should be ashamed of themselves.

Beyond that, the performance in Vancouver underlined something that has been bothering us all season. Somehow, these Canadiens have always looked like they were less than the sum of their parts.

You look at the season the top line has had, with David Desharnais centring Pacioretty and Erik Cole (and Tomas Plekanec stepping in ably Saturday night). You look at Josh Gorges and the emergence of the young defencemen, Alex Emelin and Raphael Diaz. You look at Carey Price, who has kept the Canadiens in almost every game even if he hasn't been quite the force he was last year – and you wonder: Why are they so bad?

Well, perhaps if there are some adjustments – beginning at the top with the dismissal of control freak Pierre Gauthier – next year will bring a dramatic turnaround. Certainly it was dramatic in Vancouver Saturday. And watching Markov make his comeback was a moment to treasure.

Peyton Place: It's no secret that we here at MMQB Central have never been a fan of Colts QB Peyton Manning. Too much jumping around behind centre, too much blaming teammates when things go wrong, too much with the Hydrant Move (lifting one's leg before the snap, like a dog approaching a fire hydrant.)

That said, Manning is undeniably a great quarterback, the one and only reason the Colts have been a contender most of the past decade. He is also the subject of the worst call in MMQB history, when we said the Colts should have drafted Ryan Leaf instead. Mercifully, that's the only time we've EVER been wrong. Really. Honest. Oh, never mind ...

By a rude coincidence, the Colts dumped Manning 11 years to the day after the Dallas Cowboys waived three-time Super Bowl winner Troy Aikman. There is no gratitude in football, especially not when a \$28-million bonus is involved.

Squishing Grapes: There is talk that Brian Burke has a good deal of support among his fellow GMs when it comes to dealing with Don Cherry's absurd rants and that the NHL might ask Hockey Night in Canada to muzzle Cherry (and Ron MacLean, who has gone from being Cherry's foil to being an arrogant loudmouth himself).

It's a pity it has come to this, because overall, HNIC has such a strong production, keyed by people like Jim Hughson, Craig Simpson, Elliotte Friedman and Cassie Campbell. (And Eric Francis, who has somehow been tossed into the mix, like a rusty Ford Pinto in a Formula One race.)

But there is going to come a point when any sports league is not going to take the constant stream of venom spewed from Cherry and, to an increasing extent, MacLean. That's not what the NHL wants from broadcasters who help shape it's image: remember, these are not independent journalists (or, in Cherry's case, a journalist at all) but analysts who are expected to stay within certain parameters.

When Cherry went after Burke, he may finally have tangled with a force that can bring him down. It would be the best thing that could happen to the world of hockey.

Coming prepared: Thanks to pre-Olympic coverage from England for this gem on Muhammad Ali, who won a boxing gold medal in Rome in 1960. Before the Games, Ali (then the 18-year-old Cassius Clay) didn't want to go because he was afraid to fly.

After his boyhood boxing coach Joe Martin persuaded him he had to be in Rome, Clay agreed to go – but prepared for the flight by visiting an army surplus store. He purchased a parachute, which he strapped on and wore throughout the flight to Rome.

Heroes: Nik Zoricic, Max Pacioretty, David Desharnais, Erik Cole, Josh Gorges, Evgeni Malkin, Steven Stamkos, Henrik Lundqvist, Jaroslav Halak, Michael Ryder, Peyton Manning, Cassius Clay's parachute &&& last but not least, the incomparable Lionel Messi.

Zeros: Pierre Gauthier, Don Cherry, Ryan Leaf, the trapezoid, Jeffrey Loria, David Samson, Claude Brochu, Ryan Braun, Tiger Woods, LeBron James, Maxim Lapierre, Scott Gomez &&& last but not least, the political sage of the trailer park, Tim Thomas.

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Habs would need a lucky streak of 13 wins to maybe make playoffs; don't bet the farm

Mike Boone

Montreal Gazette

March 11, 2012

VANCOUVER – It would be the greatest story EVER in Montreal's long, frequently glorious sports history.

If your Canadiens – sparked by the long-awaited but not infrequently doubted return of Andrei Markov in Saturday's 4-1 trouncing of the mighty Vancouver Canucks – were to win all 13 of their remaining games, beginning Monday in Buffalo (7 p.m., TSN, RDS, TSN-990 Radio), they would end the regular season with 90 points.

And that total just might punch a ticket to the postseason dance.

Imagine that as you face Monday morning: A team that left Montreal in a state of rigor mortis a week ago – embarking on a three-game swing through Western Canada, where they never win – would complete its late-season resurrection on Easter weekend.

It's not going to happen, of course.

The remainder of the Canadiens' schedule includes four sets of back-to-back games they'd have to sweep. The Canadiens also would have to win seven road games – including visits to highly inhospitable barns in Philadelphia, New York, Washington and Carolina.

So no, it's not going to happen.

A greater likelihood, to cap off this bitterly disappointing season, is that the Canadiens will win just enough to climb up from last place in the Eastern Conference, thereby squeezing themselves out of a top five lottery draft pick.

Wouldn't that be a female dog?

The Canadiens suck all season and then catch fire just in time to immolate themselves out of the Nail Yakupov/Mikhail Grigorenko sweepstakes?

That scenario could be dashed as early as Monday evening.

The Sabres have been hot: 7-2-1 in their last 10.

Wins in Edmonton and Vancouver elevated the Canadiens to 3-7.

Let's assume the Canadiens return to form in the Eastern time zone. At the June draft in Pittsburgh, they will make their highest selection since using the fifth overall pick in 2005 to select Carey Price.

Assuming they draft a phenom, what kind of team will the kid be joining at training camp in September?

On the evidence of their western road trip – which usually ends like Napoleon's retreat from Russia – the Canadiens have the pieces in place to become a greatly improved hockey club.

Start with the goaltender.

After a bad night in Calgary, where he was brutal on the Curtis Glencross goal that proved to be the winner, Carey Price went into a deep funk. Price watched Peter Budaj beat the Oilers, then celebrated a return to his native province by smashing two \$300 sticks at Friday practice in Vancouver.

Contract concerns? Price has spent the season playing himself out Pekka Rinne money.

Has he been reading St. Louis Blues game summaries?

Or maybe it's just the frustration of having to be almost perfect every night behind an undersized and soft defence corps.

Whatever the cause of his malaise, Price turned it around and stoned the Canucks. He was particularly solid through a 15-shot onslaught in the first period.

The return of Markov helped. After 17 months on the shelf, the defenceman was understandably rusty on the breakdown that led to Ryan Kesler's goal.

But Markov played 17 very good minutes, mostly paired with the fellow Russian who will be his latest protégé.

(A tax-time tip to Alexei Emelin: Talk to Mike Komisarek about the financial benefits of playing with Markov.)

Vintage Markov was on display during the Canadiens' 5-on-3 power play during the third period. Quick, crisp passing set up P.K. Subban for the laser that lifted the Canadiens into a three-goal lead.

Markov leaped into the arms of the young defenceman, who didn't get much lovin' in Vancouver after slapping Henrik Sedin around a couple times early in the game.

Subban had an excellent trip: two goals, three assists, plus-4 while playing against the Sedins, the talented Kiddie Corps in Edmonton and the top forwards in Cammalleri-less Calgary.

With Raphael Diaz still nursing a lower-body knock, Chris Campoli played 16 minutes in Vancouver and solidified his spot as the No. 5 D, past Tomas Kaberle and Yannick Weber.

Protecting Markov obliged Randy Cunneyworth to dress seven defencemen against the Canucks, an alignment the Canadiens coach probably will use again in Buffalo.

And unless David Desharnais is ready, we'll see Tomas Plekanec centring the Canadiens' top line.

Until Desharnais was hurt during the first period in Edmonton, Plekanec had played with every wing on the team – except the best ones. Although he did not assist on Max Pacioretty's two goals in Edmonton or the pair Erik Cole bagged on Saturday, Plekanec played like a guy who had just got out of jail.

Lars Eller, who had been on the wing against Edmonton until Desharnais's injury, inherited Plekanec's spot between Ryan White and Rene Bourque.

They did not make the scoresheet; but White had three hits and was a constant irritant to the Canucks, while Bourque, whose game came to life in front of his homeys in Edmonton, had four shots on goal in Van.

After missing the Calgary game with an eye injury, third-line centre Scott Gomez played solid games in Edmonton and Vancouver, backing up defenders with his speed and making smart passes – he's wiser with a visor – to a variety of linemates, most frequently Aaron Palushaj.

In all three rinks on the western tour, there were large contingents of fans decked out in bleu-blanc-rouge. They even got to bray Olé in Vancouver.

The far-flung faithful asked the same question as hockey pundits in each city: What the heck happened to the Canadiens this season?

Well, it's a long story. But here's the Twitter version:

It took 483 days, but the Canadiens are undefeated with Andrei Markov in the lineup.

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