



Buffalo Sabres

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Sabres beat the best, inch closer to final playoff spot

John Vogl

The Buffalo News

March 24, 2012

NEW YORK — If Friday is any indication — and it almost assuredly was — the final two weeks of the NHL season are going to be filled with so many twists and turns that motion-sickness patients will be forbidden from taking part.

The Sabres expect to be part of the ride after yet another victory.

Buffalo believes it can beat anyone right now, and it proved it again. The Sabres dispatched the top team in the Eastern Conference, earning a 4-1 victory over the New York Rangers. The Sabres pulled even with eighth-place Washington for the second time this week, each team putting up 82 points in 75 games.

"We've worked our way to get there, but we're not done yet," Sabres right wing Drew Stafford said in Madison Square Garden. "We know that we're a good team. We're a playoff team. ... We just hadn't been able to put it together till now when it counts."

As Friday showed, every minute counts now. The Sabres scored twice in the third period to pull away. Almost simultaneously, the Capitals collapsed. They held a 3-0 lead at home over Winnipeg but lost in overtime, 4-3. The seventh-place Ottawa Senators got trounced by Montreal and are just two points ahead of the Sabres and Caps.

"If we can get one more team involved, it's just one extra spot up for grabs," Sabres coach Lindy Ruff said. "It just creates some pressure. If we win out we're in, and that's a good feeling when you can control your own destiny."

Goaltender Ryan Miller — who combined with Stafford, Tyler Ennis and Travis Turnbull to drop the Rangers — says no one's destiny is written.

"It's going to come down to the last two, three games of hockey anyways, so you just have to keep pace and know that you just have to win," Miller said. "There's going to be no relaxing at any point."

The Sabres certainly couldn't take it easy Friday. The Rangers were pushing hard in the third period to erase the Sabres' 2-1 lead. Stafford and Ennis made them pay for their aggression.

Ennis scored with six minutes left to give Buffalo a cushion, and Stafford scored his second of the night with 3:51 left to send Blueshirts fans among the 18,200 streaming toward the exits. All of the linemates' goals came on odd-man rushes.

"Anytime you can get that many two-on-ones you'd better put them away," Ennis said. "They were coming hard in the third, but Millsie shut the door. When they need to score they're going to take chances, and that's when we capitalized on their aggressiveness."

One game after getting criticized by Ruff for not playing well, the trio of Ennis, Stafford and Marcus Foligno combined for eight points.

"I love them again," Ruff said.

Foligno, who had two assists, wasn't the only rookie to have a memorable night. Buffalo's opening goal fulfilled a dream for Turnbull. The rookie scored his first NHL goal in his second game, putting Buffalo in front with 3:14 gone in the second period after the team weathered the Rangers' early storm and took over the momentum.

Teammate Andrej Sekera collected the souvenir puck for Turnbull, who can always stare at a puck he never saw go in. The 25-year-old University of Michigan product took a crushing check from Stu Bickel on the end boards. Before falling to the ice, Turnbull was able to put the puck toward the front with the hope something good would happen.

It did. New York's John Mitchell mimicked soccer star Lionel Messi and booted the puck past goalie Henrik Lundqvist.

"I can't even really describe how I feel right now," Turnbull said. "I think the biggest thing, too, is the win here. What a big win. The boys played great, and I'm real happy to be a part of it."

New York's Brian Boyle tied the game midway through the second. Stafford put Buffalo back in front before the period ended, getting his first dose of revenge on Lundqvist. The goalie robbed him in the first — stretching out his left pad to deflect the puck with part of it already over the goal line — but Stafford welcomed a leaping Ennis into his arms with 6:17 to go.

They weren't done. Ennis kept the puck on a two-on-one with Stafford to beat Lundqvist, then fed Stafford the next time the situation arose.

Ennis has five goals and 12 points in the last seven games. Stafford has four goals and 12 points in the last six.

"We're just worried about winning our games," said Stafford, whose team hosts Minnesota tonight in First Niagara Center. "Obviously, we've put in a lot of work to get to the position where we're at, but obviously we're not done yet. ... We need to take care of our end of things. We know that if we play well, take care of our own business, win the games, get the two points, we'll be sitting just fine."

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Pominville nominated for Masterton Trophy

John Vogl

The Buffalo News

March 24, 2012

NEW YORK — There have been plenty of long nights for the Sabres. They lead the league in back-to-back games, and they often arrive home or in the next city after most Buffalonians have gone to bed.

Corey Tropp would love to sleep in those following mornings. Who wouldn't? But the rookie has learned from Jason Pominville that's not the wisest move.

Tropp is Pominville's roommate on the road and has a stall next to the captain in First Niagara Center. He sees firsthand that dedication to hockey at all times leads to success when it matters most. Tropp sees why the Buffalo chapter of the Professional Hockey Writers' Association has voted Pominville as its candidate for the Bill Masterton Memorial Trophy.

"Part of the things you don't understand when you're growing up as a young guy is how hard it actually is to play 82 games and be at your best every night," Tropp said. "You need to stick to a certain scheduled routine and not break from your routine. There's going to be mornings when you're tired, but you've still got to get up, get your breakfast in, get your stretches in and get on the bike, do the little things that are going to make you better at 7 o'clock that night, even if you don't want to do it that morning.

"I've only roomed with him the last couple road trips, but I've definitely caught on to a few of the things he does on a routine basis. I think that's why he plays almost every game, if not every game, for the last handful of years and why he's as good as he is."

Pominville was in the lineup for Friday's 4-1 victory over the New York Rangers, and he's expected to skate tonight when the Sabres host Minnesota. He is on pace to play all 82 games, which is little surprise. Pominville has played in 533 of the Sabres' 543 games since he got called up in 2005-06.

"At the end of the day, you get paid to play games and be on the ice," Pominville said. "I've taken a lot of pride throughout the years in keeping myself in the best shape possible, kind of listening to your body, trying to do what's best for it.

"I've been fortunate, too. Pretty freak injuries can happen. The one in the playoffs last year [slicing an ankle tendon] was one of them. It caught me off-guard. I never thought anything like that could have happened, but it did. I was fortunate that I didn't have to deal with many of them throughout my career so far."

Pominville's ability to rebound from the injury also factored into the captain being nominated for the Masterton, which is presented annually to the NHL player who best exemplifies the qualities of perseverance, sportsmanship and dedication to hockey. Each chapter of the PHWA selects one

player, then the writers' association selects a winner from the 30 candidates. Don Luce (1975) and Pat LaFontaine (1995) are the only Sabres to win.

The Sabres have counted on Pominville more than ever, something no one would have expected back when they waived him in the fall of 2005. Pominville, who went unclaimed, was named captain prior to the season opener. Not a rah-rah type, Pominville nonetheless has become more vocal with on-ice speeches during practice and lengthy dressing room chats.

He's also been the team's most dependable player. Pominville leads the Sabres in goals, assists and points. He's avoided slumps, going more than two games without a point just twice.

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The Sabres conclude their 20th set of back-to-back games tonight when the Wild visit First Niagara Center. It is one of the few chances left for backup goalie Jhonas Enroth to get a start.

Ryan Miller has been among the league's best for two months, leaving Enroth to watch from the bench. Miller started for the 27th time in 29 games Friday night.

Enroth may start against the weaker, out-of-conference opponent to get Miller added rest for the final seven games. The Sabres, though, have Sunday and Monday off, so Miller could play back-to-back and rest then.

"I've got a plan in place," coach Lindy Ruff said. "I've talked about and we've discussed the goaltending and laid out a plan for the rest of the year."

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Sabres try to take over 8th in East by beating Wild

Brian Hunter

NHL.com

March 23, 2012

WILD (31-32-10) at SABRES (36-29-10)

TV: FS-N (HD), MSG-B (HD)

Last 10: Minnesota 3-6-1; Buffalo 6-2-2

Season Series: This is the only meeting of the season between the Wild and the Sabres. In their most recent matchup, Buffalo won 3-2 in overtime at Minnesota on March 6, 2011, with [Drew Stafford](#) scoring 46 seconds into the extra period.

Big Story: The Sabres can take over the eighth spot in the Eastern Conference by picking up at least a point out of this game. Their 4-1 win against the Rangers on Friday night at Madison Square Garden coupled with the Capitals' overtime loss to the Jets left the teams tied at 82 points, but Washington holds the tiebreaker with six more non-shootout wins. Each team has seven games remaining, but the Caps don't play again until Sunday -- when they also host the Wild.

Team Scope:

Wild: While victories have been few and far behind for Minnesota during the second half of the season, the Wild enter Saturday seeking their first three-game winning streak since December -- back when they led the NHL standings. Thursday's win came in most impressive fashion, as the Wild battled back against a Calgary team desperate for points after spotting the Flames a two-goal lead. [Dany Heatley](#) started the rally with a power-play goal, [Darroll Powe](#) scored with 7:37 left to force overtime and [Devin Setoguchi](#) netted the shootout winner in a 3-2 triumph.

"It's nice to get a chance to redeem myself," said Setoguchi, who had an infamous fall during a shootout attempt in Montreal at the start of the month. "It's a good laugh the next day after [Montreal]. It obviously stunk at the time to fall head-first."

Sabres: Visiting an opponent fighting to retain the No. 1 seed in the East, Buffalo came out with the better effort in a 4-1 win. The first goal of [Travis Turnbull](#)'s NHL career got the scoring started in the second period, and after the Rangers got the equalizer the Sabres responded with three unanswered goals. Stafford's go-ahead goal put them in front heading into the third, where he and [Tyler Ennis](#) each had insurance strikes in the final six minutes. [Ryan Miller](#) stopped 26 shots as Buffalo improved to 17-5-5 in its last 27 games.

"That's all we're worrying about -- winning our own games," Stafford said. "We've put a lot of work to get into the position we're at now, but we're not done yet. We need to take care of our end of things. We're not worried about the other teams around us. We know if we play well, take care of our own business and win the games, get the two points, we'll be sitting just fine."

"Right now, we haven't accomplished anything. We were able to get ourselves in this position, but we still need to keep going."

Who's Hot: [Kyle Brodziak](#) has two goals and four assists during a three-game points streak for the Wild and has set a career high with 40 points this season. [Erik Christensen](#) has four goals in his last five games. ... Stafford has four goals and eight assists in his last six games for the Sabres. Ennis has five goals and seven assists in his last seven games. Miller is 12-1-4 in his last 17 games and hasn't lost in regulation in eight starts.

Injury Report: Minnesota lost defensemen [Jared Spurgeon](#) (concussion) and [Marco Scandella](#) (hand) during the game against Calgary. Scandella could play Saturday. Forward [Matt Kassian](#) is out of the lineup with a groin injury. Defenseman [Justin Falk](#) (leg) is sidelined indefinitely. ... Buffalo forwards [Nathan Gerbe](#) and [Patrick Kaleta](#) missed Friday's game with upper-body injuries. Forwards [Jochen Hecht](#) (concussion) and [Matt Ellis](#) (knee) are out indefinitely.

Stat Pack: The Wild are 23-16-7 this season with captain [Mikko Koivu](#) in the lineup, and 8-16-3 when he doesn't play. ... Sabres rookie [Marcus Foligno](#) has five goals and four assists in eight games since he was called up.

Puck Drop: Minnesota remains a dangerous opponent, particularly with the return Thursday of Koivu, but the injuries on the blue line against Calgary forced forward [Matt Cullen](#) into taking some shifts on defense.

"I told the defensemen that it wasn't that hard," Cullen said, grinning. "By no means am I a smooth backwards skater. But what else are you going to do? We know how to play hockey, so we did what we had to do."

Surging Sabres shut down Rangers 4-1

Dave Lozo

NHL.com

March 23, 2012

NEW YORK -- The [Buffalo Sabres](#) are outside the top eight in the Eastern Conference, but if they continue to play like they did Friday night, it's only a matter of time before they find themselves in a playoff position.

[Drew Stafford](#) had two goals and an assist, [Ryan Miller](#) made 26 saves and the Sabres whipped the [New York Rangers](#) 4-1 at Madison Square Garden to run their record to 17-5-5 over their last 27 games and 5-0-2 in their last seven.

Both the Washington Capitals, who blew a third-period lead and lost 4-3 in overtime to the Winnipeg Jets on Friday night, and Sabres have 82 points with seven games remaining. The Capitals own the tiebreaker over the Sabres for eighth place in the East by virtue of their 35 regulation wins -- but thanks to a showdown between the teams in Washington on Tuesday, Buffalo controls its destiny.

The Sabres are also two points back of the Ottawa Senators, who were hammered by the Montreal Canadiens 5-1 on Friday, for seventh place in the East.

Confidence is brimming throughout the Sabres locker room, and it's translating into a sizzling finish to the regular season.

"If we can get one more team involved, it's just one extra spot up for grabs," Sabres coach Lindy Ruff said of the No. 7 seed suddenly seeming attainable. "It just creates the pressure. It gives us a shot of bringing them into the fold. You can't ask for anything more.

"We have to take care of what we have to take care of. I told the team this morning -- if we win out, we're win. That's a good feeling when you can control your own destiny. I know it's not probably realistic, but it still gives us the upper hand."

[Tyler Ennis](#) had a three-point night of his own with a goal and two assists. He said the Sabres aren't afraid of anyone, especially after beating the top team of the Eastern Conference in its own building.

"I think we're just really confident," Ennis said. "We know what we have to do. It seems like Washington keeps winning, so we have to keep winning. But we're a confident bunch. Every game is a new test for us. We just have to focus on the next game. We're playing well, Millsy seems to be stopping everything and that's giving us a lot of confidence.

"It reinforces how bad we want to make the playoffs. The Rangers are the top team in the East, and they've played great hockey all year. We came out and played pretty sound in all areas, and I think it shows how bad we want to make the playoffs."

For the Rangers, it was a monumental step backward after three straight encouraging performances. Not only did they lose forward [Mats Zuccarello](#) to a broken left wrist midway through the first period, but their game was riddled with turnovers and odd-man rushes by the Sabres. John Mitchell was the culprit on two of Buffalo's goals, albeit one in an accidental fashion, and was glued to the bench after his turnover led to Stafford's game-winner later in the second period.

The Rangers still have a one-point lead on the Pittsburgh Penguins for first place in the East, but the Pens hold a game in hand.

"We're going to have to correct the mistakes in less than a day," said forward [Brian Boyle](#), who scored the Rangers' lone goal and was referring to the team's next game Saturday night in Toronto. "We have a short time between now and when we fly up there. That's a pretty good team, they're playing good hockey, but we've got to be better. We know we can't play like that against any team in this League."

The Sabres broke through against goaltender [Henrik Lundqvist](#) with a fluky goal 3:14 into the second period. Rookie [Travis Turnbull](#), playing in just his second NHL game, was mashed to the glass behind the Rangers net by defenseman [Stu Bickel](#). Turnbull found the puck and blindly put it to the front of the net, where it ricocheted off an unsuspecting Mitchell and past Lundqvist to make it 1-0.

Turnbull, a linemate of Rangers forward [Carl Hagelin](#) when they were together at the University of Michigan and the son of former NHL player Perry Turnbull, wasn't the only rookie making a contribution Friday. Forward [Marcus Foligno](#) had two assists and has five goals and four assists in six games since he was recalled from the AHL on March 9.

"I don't care how you get 'em. Ten years from now, he can tell everybody he got it on a breakaway," Ruff said of Turnbull's goal. "We've lost a couple bodies, but Marcus has stepped in and played really well for us. At the same time, [Corey Tropp](#) has been a hard worker and a battler and has made a lot of good plays. We've found some players that have made a difference for us down the stretch. The team right now believes it can win every night."

Boyle answered Turnbull's goal 6:18 later, but a Mitchell turnover at the offensive blue line led to Stafford's first goal of the night. Stafford took a pass Ennis and roofed a shot over Lundqvist's

catching glove to make it 2-1 with 6:17 remaining in the second period.

Ennis and Stafford put the game away late in the third period with goals 2:09 apart, but not before [Christian Ehrhoff](#) kept the Sabres ahead by a goal with some heroics while defending his crease.

With Miller out challenging a shooter, the puck found its way to the stick of Rangers sniper [Marian Gaborik](#) at the right side of the net. Ehrhoff slid into the crease to block two tries by Gaborik, whose third attempt went wide.

Less than a minute later, after Miller turned aside a quality scoring chance by [Brad Richards](#), Ennis finished a 2-on-1 with a wrist shot that squeezed between the blocker arm and body of Lundqvist.

"I thought the save of the night was [Christian Ehrhoff's](#)," said Miller, who is 12-1-4 in his last 17 games. "Back-door leg save."

The Sabres won't have much time to enjoy this victory -- they go home to host the Minnesota Wild on Saturday night in the 20th of their League-high 21 back-to-backs.

"That's all we're worrying about -- winning our own games," Stafford said. "We've put a lot of work to get into the position we're at now, but we're not done yet. We need to take care of our end of things. We're not worried about the other teams around us. We know if we play well, take care of our own business and win the games, get the two points, we'll be sitting just fine.

"Right now, we haven't accomplished anything. We were able to get ourselves in this position, but we still need to keep going."

Follow Dave Lozo on Twitter: @DaveLozo

Minnesota (31-32-10) at Buffalo (36-29-10)

Santosh Venkataraman

STATS

March 24, 2012

The [Buffalo Sabres](#) are surging behind [Drew Stafford](#), [Tyler Ennis](#) and [Marcus Foligno](#).

They'll look for a fourth straight win Saturday night as they continue their pursuit of a playoff berth when they host the [Minnesota Wild](#).

Buffalo (36-29-10) is 12-2-4 since Feb. 17, improving from 14th place in the Eastern Conference to currently being tied with Washington for eighth. The Sabres, who also trail seventh-place Ottawa by two points, were 10 points out of a spot before this hot streak.

"We're just trying to ride this wave as long as we can," Stafford said.

The line of Stafford, Ennis and Foligno has been a key, combining for eight points in Friday's 4-1 road win over the [New York Rangers](#). The trio has totaled 33 points over a 5-0-2 stretch since Foligno was called up from the minors March 9.

The rookie has created a sense of excitement for the Sabres, who are eager for a strong finish.

"We've put a lot of work into getting to the position where we're at right now, but obviously we're not there yet," Stafford said. "We're not worried about the other teams around us. We know if we play well, take care of our business and win the games, we'll be sitting just fine. Right now we haven't accomplished anything."

Buffalo's opponents are 2 for 31 on the power play in the last 12 games. The Sabres do not figure to get much of a challenge from a Minnesota unit among the league's worst at 15.1 percent.

The Wild (31-32-10) have not won a road game in regulation since Feb. 2 and enter this two-game trip aware of how well their opponents are playing.

"They've got a good team, they play their game well, they know what it is and certainly a team like that they had some struggles earlier but quite often that can strengthen your group if you get through it the right way and they appear to be going in that direction," Minnesota coach Mike Yeo said.

Yeo was forced to employ a depleted group of defensemen in Thursday's 3-2 shootout win over Calgary. [Jared Spurgeon](#) left after getting elbowed in the head and [Marco Scandella](#) exited after blocking a shot with his hand.

Spurgeon won't play Saturday, but Scandella is expected to return.

“We think that he’s going to be OK for tomorrow and barring some kind of setback in the morning, we would expect him to play,” said Yeo about Scandella.

The Wild got healthier Thursday when captain [Mikko Koivu](#) returned from a shoulder injury after missing 15 games to center the top line with [Dany Heatley](#) and [Devin Setoguchi](#). Minnesota, which is close to elimination, is seeking to win three straight for the first time since a season-high seven-game run Nov. 28-Dec. 10, 2011.

“We do have something to build off of as far as the last couple of games and with Mikko coming back, that does give us a lift I think,” Yeo said.

The Sabres are 6-0-1 in their last seven at home, although the Wild have taken their last four visits to the First Niagara Center.

Stafford scores 2, surging Sabres top Rangers

Ira Podell

STATS

March 24, 2012

NEW YORK (AP)—With eight games remaining, [Buffalo Sabres](#) coach Lindy Ruff's message to his team was simple: Win them all, and we're in the playoffs.

Then they went out and knocked off the Eastern Conference-leading [New York Rangers](#).

[Drew Stafford](#) had two goals and an assist, linemate [Tyler Ennis](#) had a goal and two assists, and [Marcus Foligno](#) set up both of them to lead the surging Sabres to a 4-1 victory Friday night. [Travis Turnbull](#) scored his first NHL goal.

Buffalo moved up into an eighth-place tie in points with Washington, which lost in overtime to Winnipeg on Friday night, and is only two points behind seventh-place Ottawa with two weeks left.

"We're just trying to ride this wave as long as we can," Stafford said.

And what a ride it has been.

The Sabres were 14th in the 15-team Eastern Conference, 10 points out of a playoff spot, on Feb. 17. They are 12-2-4 since and are trying to become the second team to rally from such a deficit so late to get a postseason berth.

"We've put a lot of work into getting to the position where we're at right now, but obviously we're not there yet," Stafford said. "We're not worried about the other teams around us. We know if we play well, take care of our business and win the games, we'll be sitting just fine. Right now we haven't accomplished anything."

Ruff wasn't too pleased with the line of Ennis, Stafford and Foligno during a win over Montreal on Wednesday, but he saw lots to like against the Rangers. If Buffalo finishes eighth, and the Rangers hold on for the top seed, these teams will meet in the first round of the playoffs.

The Sabres have seven games remaining.

"We've got to take care of what we've got to take care of," Ruff said. "It's a good feeling when you can control your own destiny. I know it's not probably realistic, but it still gives us the upper hand."

New York had won the first three meetings this season—two after regulation — but Buffalo avoided a sweep on Friday.

“They had our number most of the year,” said [Ryan Miller](#), who made 26 saves. “It’s nice to just break through and show we can beat this team.

“But we’re getting ahead of ourselves. We’ll talk in a few weeks.”

Stafford had goals in the second and third periods and Ennis added one in the third. The Sabres took advantage of New York’s aggressiveness as it tried to rally, and caught the Rangers with odd-man rushes that produced a pair of goals within 2:09 that made a 2-1 game 4-1.

The Rangers missed a chance to tie St. Louis atop the overall NHL standings, and now are in a precarious position in the East. They still lead Pittsburgh by one point, but the Rangers have only eight games remaining, compared to nine for the surging Penguins.

“We just need to play how we need to play,” said [Brian Boyle](#), who scored New York’s lone goal. “We didn’t focus on (points) all year and we shouldn’t now. Just focus on being the best team we can.”

New York went 4-3 on its seven-game homestand and will play its next three on the road, starting Saturday at Toronto.

The Rangers nearly tied it multiple times in the third period, with its best chance coming with under 7 minutes remaining when Buffalo’s [Christian Ehrhoff](#) and [Derek Roy](#) laid out in the crease to assist Miller in keeping the puck out of the net. Just seconds later, Ennis fired a shot that deflected in off goalie [Henrik Lundqvist](#) to make it 3-1, and Stafford scored again at 16:09.

“It just reinforces how badly we want to make the playoffs,” Ennis said.

The Rangers thought they had tied it moments earlier, but [Brandon Dubinsky’s](#) goal was waved off because of a hand pass.

It was a rough second period for Rangers forward [John Mitchell](#), who had a direct hand—and skate—in Buffalo’s two goals.

New York defenseman [Stu Bickel](#) landed a crushing hit on Turnbull behind the Rangers net, but the Sabres forward—playing in his second NHL game—was able to get his stick on the loose puck enough to nudge it in front with his backhand. Mitchell was moving toward the crease and kicked the puck in the net to give Buffalo a 1-0 lead 3:14 into the second.

Referee Kevin Pollock picked up the puck after it had been swept out of the net, tossed it to Buffalo defenseman [Andrej Sekera](#), who flipped it to someone on the Sabres bench for safe keeping. Turnbull is the 29th player to score for the Sabres this season.

New York got even at 9:32 on Boyle’s seventh goal of the season, but another mistake by Mitchell led to another Sabres score.

Mitchell carried the puck inside the Buffalo zone and tried to skate deeper, when he got stripped of the puck by the backchecking Foligno. The quick Sabres suddenly had a 3-on-1 rush going the other way. Foligno sent a pass to Ennis, who then fed it to Stafford for a rising drive from the right side that sailed over Lundqvist's shoulder with 6:17 left in the second.

Stafford has been a key cog in the Sabres' recent surge toward a playoff spot. With his big performance Friday, he has four goals and eight assists in six games.

NOTES: The Rangers lost forward [Mats Zuccarello](#) in the first period when he was struck by a puck and broke his wrist. ... Rangers D [Tim Erixon](#) earned his first NHL point in his 17th game—all the season—by assisting on Boyle's goal. ... Columbus leads the NHL with goals from 30 players this season. The Sabres have had goals from 30 players three times, the most recent during the 1991-92 season.

Pominville voted Sabres' Masterton nominee

Associated Press

March 23, 2012

BUFFALO, N.Y. — Buffalo Sabres captain Jason Pominville has been voted the team's Masterton Trophy candidate for best exemplifying the qualities of perseverance, sportsmanship and dedication to hockey.

Pominville was selected by members of the Professional Hockey Writers' Association, who cover the Sabres.

Pominville has shown perseverance during a seven-year NHL career in Buffalo. He's gone from being waived by the Sabres in 2005 — Pominville went unclaimed — to being a consistent 20-plus goal-scorer and named the team captain this season.

The 29-year-old leads Buffalo with 28 goals and 67 points in 74 games this season. He also has just 12 penalty minutes.

Finalists will be chosen from the list of 30 nominees, one from each team, and the winner announced in June.

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Ryan Miller on Sabres' run, preseason hype

Pierre Lebrun

ESPN.com

March 23, 2012

The [Buffalo Sabres](#) have been on a tear, going 11-2-3 since Feb. 19 and narrowing what was once a 10-point deficit behind the eighth and final playoff spot to just one point entering Friday night's tough matchup at Madison Square Garden against the Eastern Conference-leading Rangers.

Not surprisingly, leading the way in the Sabres' late-season charge has been 2010 Olympic tournament MVP [Ryan Miller](#). The 2009-10 Vezina Trophy winner has stopped 448 of 477 shots in his 15 starts during his team's five-week run for a sparkling .939 save percentage.

"We were a talented team that needed to grow and find a core identity way before anyone should have called us a contender," Ryan Miller said.

Among the more insightful interviews in the NHL, Miller answered some questions via email during his team's flight to New York on Thursday. I sent him the questions just before he boarded the flight.

LEBRUN: Your team has been on fire since mid-February. What sparked the turnaround in your mind? Was there a "moment" that changed everything, or was it more of a process?

MILLER: Personally, I think it was mainly attention to our high forward in the O-zone and neutral zone and playing better team defense. It allowed for more puck pressure and fewer odd-man rushes against. Teams have had to try to generate offense by working in our D-zone, and there are better odds we will have four to five guys back. I think it was a culmination of "enough is enough" with losing. It took us too long into the season to establish a system that played to our strengths as a team, but we have more of an identity now, and we have a chance to compete with the top teams.

LEBRUN: Is this the team, the way it is playing now, that you envisioned back in September?

MILLER: Not quite. Each year the lineup is never what you start with through injury and trade. ... This team is a little different than I expected. But we are becoming more effective as we gain confidence in our game. This team is starting to look like a team that can achieve. I always just expect attention to detail and a competitive attitude from our teams. We didn't have that early on. We are gaining some back now.

LEBRUN: Do you think given all the hype and preseason expectations that it was hard on your team to deal with it in the first half?

MILLER: Yes. This is by no means an excuse, but I think being labeled as "Cup Contenders" simply because of hype and our change in ownership hurt our mentality and approach. Instead of

building toward smaller goals as a team and creating the culture and identity of a championship-caliber team, we skipped major steps in our approach. ... Plus, we didn't earn or deserve the label at all, so instead of growing and building in a positive light toward being contenders by playing the games and going through the challenges, we were constantly viewed as failing in every situation in the fans' eyes and in the media, and we had to constantly answer for something that I don't think we should have been labeled. We were a talented team that needed to grow and find a core identity way before anyone should have called us a contender.

LEBRUN: You took some heat individually for your play earlier in the season, unfairly or not, but certainly your numbers have noticeably improved. Have you done anything differently?

MILLER: The goalie always gets heat. ... I don't blame fans or media for talking about hockey; it is fun to be passionate about the game. I try not to pay attention because, unless you have played goalie in the NHL, I don't think anyone can understand what it is like to stand in there and be one of us, to put yourself out there every night. This year, a lot of opinion I normally avoid or ignore was dragged into the locker room by the media, and I took it hard. But I kept working and searching for my comfort level. I finally remembered I love to play and I am not doing it for what people outside the locker think about me. I'm doing it because I love hockey and I love to win. I love making saves and being on a team. I love the challenge.

As for doing anything differently. ... Goalie reflects team. Team reflects goalie. Once I was healthy I started building back my focus and awareness, and that took some time. ... I noticed my game turning when my mind was more at ease and I settled down and allowed the play to unfold. ... All of which came when we started being a more responsible team. Knowing my guys are around me allows me to read the play and commit to saves. Without them, I have to cover more options, and the odds of making a save or second save aren't as good. Having the boys cover my back and work hard makes my job easier. Every goalie in history is a reflection of how well his team plays the game. It is a team sport, and a team effort is needed to win. I just need to do my part.

Sabres' recent success brings back memories of last season's playoff run

Jesse Spector

The Sporting News

March 24, 2012

NEW YORK—Like everyone else on the playoff bubble, the Sabres are doing their fair share of watching the out-of-town scoreboard these days. More importantly, Buffalo is lighting up the in-town scoreboard.

With two goals from Drew Stafford on Friday night at Madison Square Garden, the Sabres won their third straight game, 4-1, over the Eastern Conference-leading New York Rangers. With a 12-2-3 record over the past 17 games, Buffalo still has not moved into playoff position, as the Washington Capitals hold the eighth-place tiebreaker with more non-shootout wins, but the Sabres are looking awfully similar to the team that finished last season with 16 wins in 24 games to make the playoffs.

“Obviously, we’re not done yet,” Stafford said. “We need to take care of our end of things, and we’re not worried about the other teams around us. We know that if we play well, take care of our own business, win the games and get the two points, we’ll be sitting just fine. Right now, we haven’t accomplished anything. We’re able to get ourselves in a position, but we’re still gonna keep going.”

That is as much as the Sabres can ask for, considering that after a shootout loss to the Montreal Canadiens on Feb. 17, Buffalo was dead last in the Eastern Conference and nine points out of the final playoff spot. At that time, according to Sports Club Stats, the Sabres had a 0.29% chance of making the playoffs.

Now, the Sabres have not only gotten themselves into a tie for eighth place, they have closed the seventh-place Ottawa Senators’ advantage to two points with seven games left.

“If we can get one more team involved, it’s one extra spot up for grabs,” Sabres coach Lindy Ruff said. “It just creates some pressure, and if we end up two back of Ottawa after tonight’s game, it gives us a shot at bringing them in the fold. You can’t ask for anything more.”

Friday night, the Sabres could not have asked for more from the line of Stafford, Tyler Ennis and Marcus Foligno, who combined for eight points in a game that saw 23-goal scorer Thomas Vanek go without a shot on goal and All-Star Jason Pominville held largely in check. Stafford snapped a 1-1 tie on a 2-on-1 with 6:17 left in the second period, but the biggest goal belonged to Ennis, on another odd-man rush with six minutes left in the third—almost immediately after an apparent tying goal by Brandon Dubinsky was correctly waved off for a hand pass by Ryan Callahan.

The goal was Ennis’ sixth this month, exactly half of his season total. That matches the 22-year-old’s total from last March, when the Sabres were making that oh-so-similar desperate push for a playoff berth.

“It just reinforces how bad we want to make the playoffs,” Ennis said. “The Rangers are the top team in the East, they’ve played great hockey all year and it’s a tough place to play. We came out and played pretty sound in all areas. It’s a huge win for us.”

In their quest to make the playoffs, the Sabres have a favorable road ahead, with a return home on Saturday night to face the lowly Minnesota Wild, followed by a pivotal game in Washington on Tuesday. Buffalo does then have a tough test against the Pittsburgh Penguins, but a home-and-home with the Maple Leafs evens that out and then some, before the Sabres close the season against teams in Philadelphia and Boston who may already know their playoff seeding by then.

While their bubble rivals also have soft spots on their remaining schedules, the Sabres have to like the fact that they are the hot team with the hot goalie at the right time of year. Ryan Miller made 26 saves on Friday to raise his season save percentage to .917—one point higher than it was last season, and quite a recovery from the .899 figure he sported at the All-Star break. Since then, Miller has stopped 93.6% of the shots he has faced, leading Buffalo back into the playoff race.

“It’s kind of just one big hockey game at this point,” Miller said. “You just have to get all you can out of it. It’s going to come down to the last two or three games of hockey anyway, so we just have to keep pace and know that you have to win. There’s going to be no relaxing at any point, because if you reach your goal, you’re in the playoffs and you’re playing a good team.”

For the Sabres, that might potentially mean the Rangers, the team that they beat for the first time in four tries on Friday night.

“It’s nice to break through and show we can beat this team, show that we can skate and do what we need to do to win a game,” Miller said. “But we’re getting ahead of ourselves, so we’ll talk in a few weeks.”

BIG APPLE SAUCED

Kevin Snow

Sabres.com

March 23, 2012

NEW YORK (AP) - With eight games remaining, Buffalo Sabres coach Lindy Ruff's message to his team was simple: Win them all, and we're in the playoffs.

Then they went out and knocked off the Eastern Conference-leading New York Rangers.

[Drew Stafford](#) had two goals and an assist, linemate [Tyler Ennis](#) had a goal and two assists, and [Marcus Foligno](#) set up both of them to lead the surging Sabres to a 4-1 victory Friday night. [Travis Turnbull](#) scored his first NHL goal.

Buffalo moved up into an eighth-place tie in points with Washington, which lost in overtime to Winnipeg on Friday night, and is only two points behind seventh-place Ottawa with two weeks left.

"We're just trying to ride this wave as long as we can," Stafford said.

And what a ride it has been.

The Sabres were 14th in the 15-team Eastern Conference, 10 points out of a playoff spot, on Feb. 17. They are 12-2-4 since and are trying to become the second team to rally from such a deficit so late to get a postseason berth.

"We've put a lot of work into getting to the position where we're at right now, but obviously we're not there yet," Stafford said. "We're not worried about the other teams around us. We know if we play well, take care of our business and win the games, we'll be sitting just fine. Right now we haven't accomplished anything."

Ruff wasn't too pleased with the line of Ennis, Stafford and Foligno during a win over Montreal on Wednesday, but he saw lots to like against the Rangers. If Buffalo finishes eighth, and the Rangers hold on for the top seed, these teams will meet in the first round of the playoffs.

The Sabres have seven games remaining.

"We've got to take care of what we've got to take care of," Ruff said. "It's a good feeling when you can control your own destiny. I know it's not probably realistic, but it still gives us the upper hand."

New York had won the first three meetings this season - two after regulation - but Buffalo avoided a sweep on Friday.

"They had our number most of the year," said [Ryan Miller](#), who made 26 saves. "It's nice to just break through and show we can beat this team.

"But we're getting ahead of ourselves. We'll talk in a few weeks."

Stafford had goals in the second and third periods and Ennis added one in the third. The Sabres took advantage of New York's aggressiveness as it tried to rally, and caught the Rangers with odd-man rushes that produced a pair of goals within 2:09 that made a 2-1 game 4-1.

The Rangers missed a chance to tie St. Louis atop the overall NHL standings, and now are in a precarious position in the East. They still lead Pittsburgh by one point, but the Rangers have only eight games remaining, compared to nine for the surging Penguins.

"We just need to play how we need to play," said Brian Boyle, who scored New York's lone goal. "We didn't focus on (points) all year and we shouldn't now. Just focus on being the best team we can."

New York went 4-3 on its seven-game homestand and will play its next three on the road, starting Saturday at Toronto.

The Rangers nearly tied it multiple times in the third period, with its best chance coming with under 7 minutes remaining when Buffalo's [Christian Ehrhoff](#) and [Derek Roy](#) laid out in the crease to assist Miller in keeping the puck out of the net. Just seconds later, Ennis fired a shot that deflected in off goalie Henrik Lundqvist to make it 3-1, and Stafford scored again at 16:09.

"It just reinforces how badly we want to make the playoffs," Ennis said.

The Rangers thought they had tied it moments earlier, but Brandon Dubinsky's goal was waved off because of a hand pass.

It was a rough second period for Rangers forward John Mitchell, who had a direct hand - and skate - in Buffalo's two goals.

New York defenseman Stu Bickel landed a crushing hit on Turnbull behind the Rangers net, but the Sabres forward - playing in his second NHL game - was able to get his stick on the loose puck enough to nudge it in front with his backhand. Mitchell was moving toward the crease and kicked the puck in the net to give Buffalo a 1-0 lead 3:14 into the second.

Referee Kevin Pollock picked up the puck after it had been swept out of the net, tossed it to Buffalo defenseman [Andrej Sekera](#), who flipped it to someone on the Sabres bench for safe keeping. Turnbull is the 29th player to score for the Sabres this season.

New York got even at 9:32 on Boyle's seventh goal of the season, but another mistake by Mitchell led to another Sabres score.

Mitchell carried the puck inside the Buffalo zone and tried to skate deeper, when he got stripped of the puck by the backchecking Foligno. The quick Sabres suddenly had a 3-on-1 rush going the other way. Foligno sent a pass to Ennis, who then fed it to Stafford for a rising drive from the right side that sailed over Lundqvist's shoulder with 6:17 left in the second.

Stafford has been a key cog in the Sabres' recent surge toward a playoff spot. With his big performance Friday, he has four goals and eight assists in six games.

NOTES: The Rangers lost forward Mats Zuccarello in the first period when he was struck by a puck and broke his wrist. ... Rangers D Tim Erixon earned his first NHL point in his 17th game - all the season - by assisting on Boyle's goal. ... Columbus leads the NHL with goals from 30 players this season. The Sabres have had goals from 30 players three times, the most recent during the 1991-92 season.

Three star selections

1st: DREW STAFFORD
2nd: RYAN MILLER
3rd: TYLER ENNIS

Winning Goaltender

Ryan Miller

Losing Goaltender

Henrik Lundqvist

Stafford, Ennis Stay Hot; Sabres Beat Rangers 4-1

Dan Cave

WGR 550

March 24, 2012

The line of Tyler Ennis, Drew Stafford, and Marcus Foligno continued its torrid pace on Friday night, racking up 8 total points in a 4-1 win over the New York Rangers. Stafford scored twice and Ennis found the net once as the pair converted on 3 odd-man rushes against Henrik Lundqvist.

Travis Turnbull opened the scoring with his first-ever NHL goal. The forward got credit for Buffalo's opening tally by virtue of being the last player to touch the puck. Turnbull flung a loose puck out from behind the Rangers net, but it bounced off the skate of John Mitchell and past Lundqvist to the Sabres ahead 1-0. Later in the period, however, Turnbull dropped coverage on Brian Boyle right off a faceoff and Boyle was able to stuff the puck between Miller's pads to make it 1-1.

A little over four minutes later, Drew Stafford put the Sabres back in front with his 16th goal of the season and 10th point in 6 games. Charging down the ice with Tyler Ennis and Marcus Foligno, Stafford finished off a 3-on-1 Buffalo break by snapping a shot over the glove of Lundqvist.

The Ennis line came through yet again in the 3rd period with yet another odd-man break. Ennis and Stafford came streaking in on a 2-on-1 and this time it was Stafford slipping the puck to Ennis, who ripped a shot into the Rangers net. Just a little over two minutes later, Ennis and Stafford connected again. Another 2-on-1 rush involving the two players finished with Ennis finding Stafford for his 2nd of the night and 17th of the season.

With the win, the Sabres are now only two points behind 7th place Ottawa, but still tied with the 8th place Capitals following their 4-3 OT loss to Winnipeg. Both Buffalo and Washington have 82 points, with the Caps holding the tiebreaker.

Buffalo is right back at it on Saturday when they return home to face the Minnesota Wild. Faceoff is at 7:00 p.m. on the Buffalo Sabres Radio Network at WGR SportsRadio 550.

1st Period

Goals

None

Penalties

None

2nd Period

Goals

3:14 - BUF - Travis Turnbull (1) (Brad Boyes)

9:32 - NYR - Brian Boyle (7) (Artem Anisimov, Tim Erixon)

13:43 - BUF - Drew Stafford (16) (Tyler Ennis, Marcus Foligno)

Penalties

4:08 - NYR - Dan Girardi (2 min. - holding)

10:33 - BUF - Tyler Ennis (2 min. - delay of game)

3rd Period

Goals

14:00 - BUF - Tyler Ennis (12) (Drew Stafford, Marcus Foligno)

16:09 - BUF - Drew Stafford (17) (Tyler Ennis)

Penalties

2:42 - BUF - Christian Ehrhoff (2 min. - tripping)

Goaltending

BUF - Ryan Miller (26 saves, 27 shots)

NYR - Henrik Lundqvist (22 saves, 26 shots)

Power Plays

BUF - 0 of 1

NYR - 0 of 2

Three Stars

1.) Drew Stafford (2 G, 1 A)

2.) Ryan Miller (26 saves)

3.) Tyler Ennis (1 G, 2 A)

Sabres' Leino trying to make a difference

Paul Hamilton

WGR 550

March 23, 2012

New York, NY (WGR 550) -- Ville Leino hasn't lived up to what the Sabres said they were getting and what the fans were expecting. Heading into Friday's game against the Rangers, he had six goals and 16 assists and was -5.

We all know the story, he was brought in to play center, he was awful, wanted to play wing, and that didn't work. But the good news is he's played much, much better for maybe the last 15-20 games.

It hasn't translated into points, however. He has two goals in just one game out of 24 and two points in nine games.

Despite that, I love the way Leino has gotten in on the forecheck and been able to protect the puck and create opportunities with others in the past 15 games or so. When Nathan Gerbe and Pat Kaleta were healthy, Leino stepped right in for the traded Paul Gaustad and helped keep that a shutdown line.

As far as his slow start, it happened to him in Philadelphia and he knew it might happen here. "As I told you when I got here, it's going to take time," Leino said. "But I even starting thinking to myself, is it just everything new? But things started to change for the better, I'm more comfortable. It's tough to play if you're not comfortable."

It took Cody Hodgson 10 games to get his first point as a Sabre and now he has four points in three games. Leino of course knew what Hodgson was going through. "You always want to get results and when you get results, you feel a lot better. It's not easy to make things work. It's such a difference, you watch him play last game he was making plays left and right."

For the last few games Leino has been playing LW with Derek Roy and Jason Pominville. He had a slow start to Friday's game and it almost cost Buffalo. He bailed just inside his blue line because Brandon Dubinsky was bearing down on him. Leino turned it over, but he got help from teammates.

After that, the winger led four very good breakouts that got the puck deep into New York territory. Offensively it took awhile, but Leino did go in a nice forecheck that created a turnover in the slot. Buffalo got a good chance, but shot the puck wide. He had a very good chance in the slot where Roy found him, but he shot his one-timer right in Henrik Lundqvist's chest protector.

After one period, Leino had six shifts for 6:08 of work. He got credit for just one shot, but I know he had another, wringing one at Lundqvist down the RW side.

One play in the period that had nothing to do with Leino was a 2-on-1 with Marcus Foligno feeding a gorgeous cross crease pass to Drew Stafford. Stafford got the puck off immediately and Lundqvist came across with the left pad for one of the best saves of the year. It looked to me like his left pad was in the net when he made the save, but there was no TV angle to could say that conclusively.

Leino started the 2nd period just like he started the first, bailing on a play inside his own blue line to Dubinski and turning the puck over. After a penalty, Leino got a shift with Brad Boyes and Corey Tropp. He set Tropp up right in front of Lundqvist, and Tropp couldn't get the puck to settle down.

Leino made himself available to Sulzer cruising down the LW slot, but the pass was in his skates and when he kicked it up to his stick, he fanned. After two periods, Leino had 12 shifts and 12:22 of work with two shots and a hit.

How about Travis Turnbull getting his first NHL goal in just his second game? He went behind the net and got hammered by Stu Bickel. He stayed with the play, put it out front where Rangers defenseman John Mitchell kicked it into his own net. The good feeling of his first NHL goal only lasted 6:18. He lost the draw to Brian Boyle and just let him go to Ryan Miller. The big centerman took the pass in front standing all by himself.

Leino played a lot of defense in the 3rd when the Sabres were hanging back, but found himself wide open in front for what would have been Buffalo's 3rd goal, but missed an open net when the puck went off the heel of his stick.

Overall it was a solid game for Leino, nothing spectacular, but good. He finished the game with 22 shifts and 20:22 of ice time. Leino did manage 3 shots on net, not including his miss on the Rangers' wide-open net in the 3rd period.

What does the future hold for Luke Adam?

Matthew Coller

WGR 550

March 23, 2012

With some players, you take the good with the bad. You accept the turnovers because you get the goals. You shrug your shoulders at a missed hit because, at any time, a beautiful pass is probably coming next.

Luke Adam is one of those players. But lately, the ratio has been tipped too far to the bad side. Now, after a long stretch of inconsistent play in Rochester, there are more and more questions being raised about where Adam will fit in going forward.

On Friday night against the Binghamton Senators, Adam had two ugly turnovers during his first two shifts. A few shifts later, he overshot a streaking Derek Whitmore with a pass that turned into an icing call. Late in the game, he failed to get the puck to center ice during a penalty kill. It was the worst of his worst since being sent back to Rochester by the Buffalo Sabres.

Later in the period, a glimpse of the brilliant side. Late in the first period, he drove hard to the net causing confusion that led to a Colin Stuart goal.

Friday's game was a microcosm his time in Rochester.

In his first seven games after being sent down, Adam had five assists, 12 penalty minutes (none from fighting) and was minus-three. He's cut down on the penalties – only one minor in the past nine games – and has two goals, three assists in March. That's 10 points in 16 games – fewer than expected when he was sent down.

“We need him to score,” coach Ron Rolston said of Adam after the Amerks' 4-3 overtime loss.

During the 16 games in Rochester, we've seen every side that Adam showed during his time with the Sabres. We've seen the outstanding creator who scored six points in his first four games in the NHL this season. We've also seen the guy who didn't score in his last 20 in the NHL. Lately, it's been more the latter than the former.

Adam has made no excuses for his lack of production.

“I have to score goals,” he said repeatedly after the game. “I just haven't done that.”

The Sabres' former second-round pick looked dejected Friday night while answering questions. It hasn't always been that way in Rochester. After a March 9 highlight-reel goal against Binghamton, Adam was loose after the game, joking about finally “hitting the ocean” after many missed opportunities. But he hasn't scored since.

He isn't pouting about being sent down or failing to care about the Amerks' playoff push. It's a clear-cut lack of confidence. He's shooting the puck – 21 shots in his last six games – but not shooting like there's any chance it's going in. Adam reminds you of a golfer who's lost his putting stroke, often staring at the sky with frustration after every failed opportunity.

In his own end, things haven't been much better. His two-way game clearly needed improvement when Adam was sent to Rochester, but his defensive game has been average at best.

Is it simply growing pains for the 21-year-old? Absolutely. However, what once appeared to be a short stay in the Flower City has now turned into an extended one. And where it appeared there was an opening at center with his name on it in Buffalo, there isn't anymore. Flat out: things have changed and Adam has dropped from the No. 1 center early in the year to making you wonder about his future with the Sabres.

Adam's value to Buffalo has dropped since the emergence of Tyler Ennis. Ennis has 11 points in his last seven games and has turned into the team's best center since being moved back from wing. Consider him the Sabres' clear cut No. 1.

The other change post-demotion was the Sabres' trade for center Cody Hodgson. After a slow start for the road-weary Hodgson, he scored four points in two nights and appeared to finally be clicking with his new teammates. At 22, if he can live up to expectations, it's likely Hodgson will be Buffalo's No. 2 center for years to come.

Unless the Sabres trade Derek Roy in the off-season, Adam could be the odd man out. He is not a fit for fourth-line center. He has the size at 6-foot-2, 215 pounds, but not the physical presence. If the Sabres are trying to get him to play more physical in Rochester, it isn't working. Once a scorer, always a scorer.

If Roy were traded, Adam could end up as a third line center – assuming one doesn't come back in the trade and assuming Buffalo doesn't draft a center who is NHL ready. That's a lot of “if's.”

If neither of those “if's” come to fruition, Adam could simply be an insurance policy rather than the next big thing.

There is another option.

In Rochester, Adam has split time between center and wing. With Brad Boyes unlikely to be retained and both Jochen Hecht and Patrick Kaleta also free agents (Kaleta restricted FA), it's reasonable that Adam could turn end up playing as a winger for the Sabres in 2012-13.

“The positions are different,” Adam said. “But it certainly helps to be able to play both.”

Amerks fans have expressed their frustration with Adam's play. One post-game radio show caller suggested he should be sent back to the ECHL. The important thing to remember for both Sabres and Amerks fans is that Adam has shown he can be a great hockey player. He was the AHL Rookie of the Year last season and went to Ottawa as part of the NHL All-Star weekend's All-Rookie team.

The talent is there.

With the Sabres' recent hot streak, Adam is likely to stay in the AHL barring another injury in Buffalo. Where he fits in going forward? One thing is for sure: We'll never find out until he re-discovers the confidence that once made him appear a can't-miss prospect.

Amerks squander lead in OT loss to Binghamton

Kevin Oklobzija

Rochester Democrat & Chronicle

March 24, 2012

So which shot do you want to take to win a game:

a) Straight out at the top of the slot, between the tops of the faceoff circles, with all the time in the world to wind up and fire, and with absolutely nothing in the shooting lane but air; or,

b) At the right point, with a player charging toward you, and only enough time to flick a wrist.

After Friday night, Binghamton Senators defenseman Eric Grybas will be choosing “b.” His wrist shot found its way through traffic and past screened Rochester Americans goalie David Leggio just 34 seconds into overtime to give the Senators a 4-3 victory.

With 6:15 to go in the third period, Gryba was in situation “a” but watched as Leggio snared his bullet slap shot that was headed toward the top right corner of the net.

In overtime, after Stephane Da Costa beat Phil Varone cleanly on a faceoff, he was the shooter in scenario “b” and ended up the hero.

“I just tried to make myself big and find the puck and unfortunately I didn’t,” Leggio said.

And so, the Amerks lost yet another game they led and desperately needed to win.

The loser’s point for getting to overtime enabled the Amerks to tie San Antonio for eighth place in the American Hockey League’s Western Conference at 72 points.

But just like Wednesday, when they saw a 3-1 lead turn into a 4-3 shootout loss to Syracuse, the Amerks gave away the second point.

Against the Senators, the Amerks wiped out an early 2-0 deficit and took a 3-2 lead at 16:25 of the second period on Colin Stuart’s second goal of the game. But they gave up another last-minute-of-the-second-period goal, this time to Dan Henningson with 3.9 second to go, and ended up losing in the first minute of overtime.

“It’s starting to sound like a broken record but we don’t play 60 minutes,” Stuart said. “We need two points. When you’re in a game like that, in the balance that long, we just didn’t take control.”

The last-minute goal in the second period killed momentum for the Amerks. Instead of taking a lead into the third period, they were dealing with that *deja vu* feeling again.

“It’s more mental toughness than anything,” Varone said.

Said coach Ron Rolston: “We didn’t take care of the game again. It deflates you. It’s a game of momentum and it brings you down coming into the room.”

For Rolston, the point in the standings gained for losing in a shootout was somewhat justified based on the opportunities the Amerks generated. On Friday he felt lucky.

“We probably didn’t deserve to get a point,” he said.

Evan Rankin attempted to get out to block Gryba’s shot. But he was covering up for Varone, who didn’t get free from Da Costa after losing the draw.

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Wild-Buffalo game preview

Kent Youngblood

Minnesota Star Tribune

March 24, 2012

Preview: The Wild, winner of two consecutive games for the first time in a month, faces yet another team battling for a playoff spot. Buffalo was one point out of eighth place in the Eastern Conference heading into their game Friday with the New York Rangers. The Sabres are 6-2-2 in their past 10 games and are looking to become the first team in NHL history to be in last place in the conference in January and make the playoffs.

Players to watch: Wild C Kyle Brodziak's assist vs. Calgary gave him six points in his past three games. He already has a career-high 40 points. LW Dany Heatley's goal Thursday was his first in nine games. G Josh Harding has one shutout and a .964 save percentage in two victories since returning from a lower-body injury. Buffalo's hot line of late -- Tyler Ennis centering LW Marcus Foligno and RW Drew Stafford -- has 11 goals and 25 points in the past six games.

Numbers: The Sabres are 17-5-5 in their past 27 games after a 4-1 victory Friday in New York.

Injuries: For the Wild, G Niklas Backstrom (lower body), D Justin Falk (lower body), W Matt Kassian (groin) and Jared Spurgeon (concussion) are out. D Marco Scandella (lower body) is probable. Buffalo C/LW Jochen Hecht (concussion) and LW/C Matt Ellis (knee) are out.

Wild coach Yeo cries foul after blow to Spurgeon

Kent Youngblood

Minnesota Star Tribune

March 24, 2012

Wild defenseman **Jared Spurgeon** has a concussion and could be finished for the season, and coach **Mike Yeo** is upset with the elbow that caused it all.

It happened 7 minutes, 57 seconds into Thursday's game with Calgary at Xcel Energy Center when Flames forward **Alex Tanguay** caught Spurgeon in the head with an elbow that Yeo called "dirty."

"It's a flying elbow," Yeo said of the hit. "The elbow is extended, and almost above his head. It's almost above the player's head -- not Jared Spurgeon's head -- when it makes contact. So this is twice now we've lost Jared Spurgeon -- who is really an underrated player around this league, and an incredibly important piece to our lineup -- off dirty hits, real bad hits, this year."

Tanguay was assessed a two-minute minor, but it's clear Yeo believes the hit warranted more.

The NHL, however, will not take further action against Tanguay.

In a Dec. 26 game against Colorado, Spurgeon was checked into the boards from behind by **Cody McCleod**. Spurgeon missed two games because of a lower-body injury. McCleod was given a major and a game misconduct but was not suspended by the league.

This time Spurgeon will be out longer than two games. With only seven games left, Spurgeon might be done for the season.

"That is certainly a possibility," Yeo said. "This is not something, at this point in the season, we would rush him back [from]. We'll just go day-by-day right now."

Marco Scandella, who blocked a **Matt Stajan** shot with his midsection late in Thursday's victory over the Flames, should be OK to play Saturday in Buffalo. That means **Kurtis Foster** will return to the lineup as the sixth defenseman. The only way the Wild could call up another defenseman would be if Scandella were to be deemed unable to play Saturday morning.

"We expect Marco to be OK," Yeo said. "He didn't go on the ice today, but we think he'll be OK for [Saturday]."

- Goaltender **Niklas Backstrom** did not make the trip to Buffalo because of his lower-body injury. That means **Matt Hackett** will join the team on an emergency recall. It also means the Wild will continue to ride the recent hot play of **Josh Harding**, who has won his past two starts since returning from injury.

- Houston goaltender **Darcy Kuemper** had season-ending shoulder surgery Thursday. Recovery and rehabilitation is expected to take four or five months, which means Kuemper should be ready by the time training camp starts next fall. One of the organization's top prospects, Kuemper was the WHL player and goaltender of the year in 2010-11. Kuemper split his time between the Ontario Reign of the ECHL (eight games) and the AHL's Houston Aeros (19 games) this season.

- Also not making the trip to Buffalo was forward **Matt Kassian** (groin).

Minnesota Wild report: Jared Spurgeon sidelined by "dirty hit"

Bruce Brothers
Pioneer Press
March 24, 2012

Wild defenseman Jared Spurgeon suffered a concussion when he was hit by Alex Tanguay's elbow in the first period of the team's 3-2 shootout victory over the Calgary Flames on Thursday, March 22, at the Xcel Energy Center.

Spurgeon will be out indefinitely, coach Mike Yeo said Friday morning.

Yeo called it "a dirty hit" by Tanguay, and the NHL is expected to look into a possible suspension.

"It's a flying elbow," Yeo added. "His elbow is extended and almost above his head - the player's head, not Jared Spurgeon's head - when it makes contact."

Tanguay received a two-minute minor penalty for elbowing.

Yeo said it's "certainly a possibility" that Spurgeon will not play again this season for Minnesota, which has nine games remaining beginning with a game Saturday in Buffalo against the Sabres.

"This is not something at this point in the season that we would rush him back," Yeo said. "We'll just wait. Day by day right now."

This is the second injury to Spurgeon, whom Yeo called "a really underrated player around this league and an incredibly important piece to our lineup. Twice we've lost him to real bad hits, dirty hits, this year."

Spurgeon was crunched headfirst into the end boards by Cody McLeod of the Colorado Avalanche on Dec. 26 and missed two games with a lower-body injury. Yeo complained at that time because McLeod was not suspended.

Yeo said Kurtis Foster will step into the lineup in place of Spurgeon.

Briefly

With Niklas Backstrom

sidelined because of a lower-body injury and unable to make the team's road trip, the Wild recalled goaltender **Matt Hackett** from Houston. **Josh Harding** likely will start Saturday against Buffalo, but Hackett could play Sunday against Washington. ... The Wild announced that defenseman **Sean Lorenz**, their fourth-round draft pick in 2008, has signed an amateur tryout contract with Houston for the rest of this season and an AHL contract for next year. Lorenz played the past four seasons at Notre Dame, posting 13 points in 39 games for the Irish this season.

Is Dany Heatley, as is, enough for the Minnesota Wild?

Sean Gentile

The Sporting News

March 22, 2012

The Minnesota Wild have a winger. The winger is big, skilled, leads the team in points, leads the team in goals, drives puck possession and does all that against solid opposition.

The problem is that the winger is Dany Heatley.

Heatley was acquired from the San Jose Sharks in the offseason specifically to revert to his 40-goal form and lead a postseason run; instead, the Minnesota Wild, after a hot start had them atop the Western Conference as late as Dec. 18, have crashed and burned out of the postseason picture.

Heatley, 31, arrived in Minnesota via a one-for-one July trade with the Sharks that sent winger Martin Havlat to San Jose. Coming off a 26-goal second season for the Sharks that ended with a loss in the Western Conference finals, Heatley was determined to more resemble the guy that had back-to-back 50-goal seasons for the Ottawa Senators in 2005-06 and 2006-07.

Heatley, who was born in Germany while his father played professionally there and holds dual Canadian and German citizenship, expected it. The Wild expected it.

"As a goal scorer and a player, you want to be that guy," Heatley told reporters after the trade.

In 2010-11, he struggled with several injuries and stayed in the lineup for more than a month with a broken hand.

"Last year wasn't the greatest year for me personally, but I'm looking forward to getting back there," Heatley said.

Wild GM Chuck Fletcher acquired Heatley, along with winger Devin Setoguchi in a separate trade with San Jose, to pump up an offense that, in 2010-11, simply didn't get the puck on net enough—they ranked last in the NHL in shots (26.2 per game) and 26th in goals (2.48 per game).

"Our lack of goal-scoring is well documented. Our inability to shoot the puck is well documented," Fletcher said after the trade. "We've acquired two players who are able to complement the players on our team real well."

While Heatley hasn't been bad—again, 20-goal forwards with his peripheral stats don't exactly grow on trees—he simply hasn't done what Fletcher openly believed he would.

Minnesota remains, to its detriment, a low shot-volume team, and its success at the beginning of the season has been increasingly exposed as a mirage. Statistically oriented observers called it out, based on the fact that teams that shoot as little as the Wild do not score enough goals to win enough games to truly contend.

When Heatley scored his 20th goal of the season on March 1, the Wild were in their customary position: last in goal-scoring and last in shots per game. It wasn't until three weeks later that Heatley netted his 21st goal of the season, on Thursday against Calgary. Three weeks later, not much has changed; Minnesota

remains the league's worst offensive team, though center Mikko Koivu's pending return should help matters.

The issue is a familiar one for anyone who has tracked Heatley's career: How much personal blame does he bear for his team's failings? In the past, that question has taken a different form—with the Sharks and Senators, Heatley was, in some respects, expected to win titles. With the Wild, the expectation was that he'd help them make the postseason for the first time since 2008. And despite the volatile nature of the Western Conference playoff picture, that's not going to happen in 2012.

Heatley's individual lack of production this season lies mainly in a low shooting percentage. His 9.5 mark represents a career low and the continuation of a downward trend that began in 2007-08 with the Senators, when his percentage went from a career-high 18.3 to 15.1. At that point, the drop was on: He went from 15.1 to, in his first season with San Jose after demanding a trade, 13.9. Then he went from 13.9 to 12.0 in 2010-11.

The Wild, though, are playing Heatley against significantly more difficult even-strength competition than he'd faced with the Sharks, who used other forwards, like Joe Pavelski and Logan Couture, against better opponents.

Using behindthenet.ca's Corsi QualComp stat, which measures shots (including those blocked and missed) directed at the attacking net, subtracted by all those attempted on the defensive net, Heatley [has faced the second-most difficult](#) even-strength competition among Minnesota's forwards and [10th-most difficult competition](#) of all NHL forwards with at least 50 or more games played in 2011-12.

In his last season with the Sharks, Heatley's QualComp ranking: [sixth among San Jose's forwards](#) and [280th overall](#). Given that, and the fact that he generates more shots than any other member of the Wild, he remains an objectively useful player and has, in a few ways, been better this season than last.

That's still a departure from Heatley's stated goal in the fall, when he was open about his desire to show that he was still capable of scoring at an elite level and, implicitly, earning his elite paycheck; his \$7.5 million cap hit, which runs through the 2013-14 season, is tied with four others for the seventh-largest in the NHL.

"I hate talking like that, like, 'I'm so motivated,'" [Heatley told the Minneapolis Star Tribune](#) in early October. "You ever watch (HBO's) '24/7' where the boxer's like, 'I'm so motivated, I'm in the best shape of my life?' and then the champ knocks him out in the first round?"

"But yeah, inside me, there's definitely that. You want to prove to everybody, and to your new teammates, and to your new city and fans, that you're the same player you always were."

For the Wild, the question is whether the player he's become, and the player they've put him in position to be, is enough.