

Sabres Enjoy Western Hospitality

Written by Russ Miller

Thursday, 21 January 2010 11:48 - Last Updated Friday, 22 January 2010 02:07



The Buffalo Sabres are 8-1-2 in their last eleven games and sit only two points back of the Eastern Conference leading Washington Capitals. The NHL's most tenured Head Coach, Lindy Ruff has no true superstar to rely on, but he seems to be able to squeeze the most out of his charges year in and year out. This season, Buffalo's best forward so far has been Tim Connolly and the top defenseman has been the rookie Tyler Myers.

The team is winning on sound defensive effort, timely scoring and the stellar play of their All-World goaltender, **Ryan Miller**. The probable starting U.S. Olympic netminder has six wins in eight games this month and is 6-1-1 in that stretch with a goals-against-average of 1.75, a save percentage of 0.948 and one shutout.

The Sabres have absolutely dominated the Western Conference this season, enjoying an 8-1-1 record. Tuesday night's game against the Ducks didn't start so well for Buffalo. Patrick Lalime started and gave up four goals on eleven shots and was pulled after only ten minutes. Ryan Miller came in and shut the door, surrendering only one goal the rest of the way. Unfortunately for Miller that lone goal turned out to be the game winner.

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The hottest Sabre right now is **Tim Connolly**. He is currently on a 13 game point streak and has recorded 21 points over those games. Interestingly enough, since the lockout, Connolly has scored at a 73 point pace (that's pace, not actual points!), which is right about what he is on pace to finish the season with right now. Considering he's missed 49 percent of his games over the last four seasons (not including this season), odds are very good that he'll miss significant time at some point this year.

Jochen Hecht scored only eight points in his first 33 games this season (a 20 point pace). Since then, he has scored at a 73 point pace, recording 17 points in the last 19 games. Prior to last seasons injury-riddled 27 point effort, Hecht had averaged 49 points a season over the previous three years. He is currently on pace for 42 points. Over the last ten games, Hecht has been lining up primarily with Jason Pominville and Tim Connolly.

Rookie of the Year favourite **Tyler Myers** just keeps getting better. He recorded five points in October, eight points in each of the months of November and December and so far in January, he has seven points in nine games. Myers leads the team in ice time, averaging over 23 minutes per game, which is about two and a half minutes more than the next highest Sabre. I still see him falling victim to a rookie fade at some point down the stretch, but this kid is the real deal.

Thomas Vanek might be showing signs of breaking out of what's been pretty much a season-long slump. He has seven points in his last six games and averaged nearly 15:30 minutes of ice time over that stretch. That's almost two minutes per game less than what he averaged last season. Maybe being the go to guy for Austria will spark the sniper following the Olympic games.

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No Doubting Tomas

Tomas Vokoun is one of the more under-rated goaltenders out there and a fantasy favourite of mine. Although Vokoun's record is an unimpressive 5-3-1 for January, his corollary numbers are dazzling. He has a miniscule goals-against-average of 1.67, a 0.952 save percentage and two shutouts in the month.

Weekly Man Crush Update

On Tuesday there was an article in the St. Petersburg Times where Lightning Head Coach Rick Tocchet said that **Steve Downie** had been one of the team's best players over the last couple of weeks and has earned more playing time and a spot on the top line. Tocchet also praised Downie's forechecking ability and the fact that he is one of the first guys on the ice for practice.

True to his word, Tocchet has increased Downie's ice time. On Monday night, Downie played on the top line with St. Louis and Stamkos, logged nearly 17 minutes of ice time and scored the

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game winning goal. He followed that up Tuesday by playing 16:40 and recorded one assist, but oh what a sweet backhand saucer pass to send Lecavalier in alone on Lundqvist. Downie has eight points in nine January games and is on pace for 40 points and 205 penalty minutes, but with the recent uptick in ice time, he could challenge the 50 point mark when all is said and done.