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## NHL'S SABRES SHOWING SURPRISINGLY SHARP EDGE

The National Hockey League is a breeding ground for abrupt team turnarounds.

Last year, the expansionist Vegas Golden Knights were almost a unanimous pick to finish dead last in the NHL. They didn't. The Knights stunned the sports world by making it all the way to the Stanley Cup final before the clock struck midnight and Cinderella's impossible dream ended at the hands of the Washington Capitals.

But the Buffalo Sabres were obviously paying attention. Dead last — 31st out of 31 teams last year with a pathetic 25-45-12 record — in 2017-18, the Sabres are the biggest surprise of the current NHL season and are hoping to mimic what Vegas did last year. Perhaps even go one step further.

When December arrived, the Sabres were on a two-game losing streak, having lost road games to both Florida teams (Tampa Bay and Florida Panthers) in one-goal decisions. But those losses came after 10 consecutive wins that had propelled the Sabres into the best record in hockey.

So what has changed from last year? Jack Eichel, picked No. 2 the year Connor McDavid went No. 1, is one year older and one year better and has been given a sniper, Jeff Skinner, as a linemate. Skinner was acquired from Carolina in exchange for a prospect and three draft picks. Eichel leads the team in assists and points, while Skinner had 20 goals by the end of November, tied with Winnipeg's Patrik Laine for most goals in the league.

Former NHLer Jason Botterill, a Winnipegger whose family always put academics on the same level of importance as athletics, was hired as general manager by the Sabres in May 2017 and his influence is obviously paying off. He picked up free-agent goalie Carter Hutton from St. Louis in the off-season, and then acquired Patrik Berglund, Tage Thompson and Vladimir Sobotka, plus two draft picks from the Blues in exchange for high-priced Ryan O'Reilly. Those players have given the Sabres second- and third-line depth, along with Sam Reinhart, Kyle Okposo and Jason Pominville. And when the Sabres got lucky and won the draft lottery last year, Botterill took the slam-dunk obvious No. 1 available player, defenceman Rasmus Dahlin, giving Buffalo the only one-two Rasmus punch in the league. Rasmus Ristolainen is a first-unit Sabres defenceman.

There are no guarantees in the topsy-turvy world of the NHL, but three things seem obvious: The Sabres will make the playoffs; their days in the NHL's basement are long gone; and Botterill and coach Phil Housley will need to clear room in their trophy cases for end-of-season personal silverware.

- Comedy writer **Jim Barach**: "The Cleveland Browns said they want to interview **Condoleezza Rice** for their head coaching job. Apparently they are hoping she can get game scores done using the Electoral College."

- **RJ Currie's** 'punalty' box at sportsdeke.com: "If they made a short film about Toronto hoopster **Kawhi Leonard** getting a temporary tooth put in, what would it be titled? The Bridge on the Raptor Kawhi."

- **Dwight Perry** of the Seattle Times: "**Wesley Harms** blamed his 10-2 semifinal loss to two-time world champion **Gary Anderson** at the Grand Slam of Darts in Wolverhampton, England, on Anderson fouling the air with flatulence, telling Dutch TV station RTL7L: 'It'll take me two nights to lose this smell from my nose.' Anderson, however, vehemently denied his triumph was wind-aided."

- **Jack Finarelli** of SportsCurmudgeon.com, taking note of Alabama kicker **Joseph Bulovas**: "Should be on NFL scouts' watch list."

- Funny guy **Brad Dickson** of Omaha: "Four years ago today Nebraska fired **Bo Pelini**. Maintenance workers at the NU athletic complex are almost finished repairing the holes in the walls in the shape of Bo Pelini's foot."

- **Barach** again: "Norway's **Magnus Carlsen** defended his world championship in chess against American **Fabiano Caruana**, but Carlsen was assessed an excessive celebration penalty when the match was over for saying 'Good game.'"

- Comedian **Argus Hamilton**, on why it's not a good idea for world chess champions **Magnus Carlsen** and **Fabiano Caruana** to dine together: "It takes them 10 minutes to pass the salt."

- **RJ Currie** once more: "Canucks LW **Antoine Roussel** was fined \$5,000 for biting Sharks defenceman **Marc-Edouard Vlasic**. The arbitrator didn't buy the classic NHL defence — said his gums weren't loaded."

- **Currie** again: "I don't condone a professional curler like **Ryan Fry** showing up for a game drunk, but let me say this: let he or she that has never been stoned throw the first rock."

- Headline at DailySnark.com: "**Jon Gruden** reportedly offering Black Friday deals on all good Raiders players left."

- **Dwight Perry** of the Seattle Times: "In the biggest upset of 2018, **Rocky Balboa** retired before **Tom Brady** did."

- Blogger **Chad Picasner**, after Syracuse brushed aside Colgate, 77-56: "Apparently it was the toothpaste, not the college."

- **Jack Finarelli** again, on QB **Bo Levi Mitchell** of the Calgary Stampeders, this year's Grey Cup MVP: "I'm a BoLevier."

Care to comment? Email [brucepenton2003@yahoo.ca](mailto:brucepenton2003@yahoo.ca)