

Commentary

(Most of the) Sabres got what they deserved

Well, when all was said and done, it looks like Ottawa Senators goalie Ray Emery found something to do in Buffalo after all — win all three Eastern Conference Championship games in Sabreland to put his team in the Stanley Cup Finals.

The real shame in that is Emery is nowhere near the caliber of goalie the Sabres made him out to be. Buffalo made Emery look like the second coming of Patrick Roy, which he most certainly is not.

What it all boils down to, unfortunately for Sabres fans, is that their team didn't show up to play early enough against Ottawa, and when Buffalo decided it was time to get going, the Sabres had practically dug themselves a hole to China. There was no way they were going to get back into the series trailing 3-0 and even 3-1, and it's unfortunate given how well the team played during the regular season.

Buffalo knew it was one of the favorites to win the Cup — how could the Sabres not be after posting the regular season's most points and goals? — yet when Ottawa showed up at HSBC Arena for Games One and Two, it was the Senators who put on a clinic. Too often during Buffalo's final series of the 2006-07 season, the majority of the Sabres looked like they were playing hockey for the first time and not as the seasoned veterans who came up a few defensive injuries shy of a Cup berth last

year. They looked confused, they looked gun-shy, they looked unusually slow for a team labeled tailor-made for the new NHL — they basically looked defeated before it even began. They did make an effort to turn things around in Games Four and Five, but by then it was too little, too late.

This was a team built to succeed, but when the going got tough against Ottawa, most of the Sabres bailed out. Defenseman Dmitri Kalinin was like a deer caught in headlights the rest of the series after his Game One turnover led to a short-handed goal. Co-captain Daniel Briere did contribute three assists and one huge goal to account for four of his 15 postseason points, but the Sabres needed more in the goal department from a guy who's going to be commanding \$6-8 million a season once free agency begins July 1. And I won't beat the dead horse that was the Sabres' lack of power-play proficiency ...

Sabres fans expected a lot more from the team that ruled the league from the start of the regular season. Of course, many people have said many times that it doesn't matter how you do in the regular season. Sure, the President's Trophy was a neat little

award that will give Buffalo sports fans starving for anything positive to hold them over for a little while. But, since the motto for the season was essentially "Stanley Cup or bust," the President's Trophy becomes Sabres fans' equivalent of four consecutive Super Bowl appearances.

Now, we have to wonder what if for another year. There's about as good of a chance of this version of the Sabres staying intact for next season as you or I have of winning the Mega Millions drawing. That, I think, is what makes the Sabres' loss the most painful.

But, at least it was nice to see the team's other co-captain, Chris Drury, play his heart out and battle though the pain that comes with doing whatever it takes to win. It was heartening to see Adam Mair and Tim Connolly refuse to take shifts off as well, and you've got to feel bad for Ryan

Miller, who did absolutely everything he could to carry his team to the Cup finals. Those four, as well as workhorse defensemen Brian Campbell and Henrik Tallinder, deserved better than their early exit. The rest of the team learned the hard way that you reap what you sow.



**JASON
NADOLINSKI**

Sports
Reporter

Sabres' season summed up as disappointment

by **MATT KRUEGER**
Reporter

Even after setting franchise records in wins (53) and points (113), winning the Presidents' Trophy for the first time and advancing to the Eastern Conference finals for the third time in four seasons, the Buffalo Sabres will look back at the 2006-07 season as a shortcoming.

The season, which held the lofty expectation of winning the team's first Stanley Cup, ended prematurely Saturday with the Sabres' 4-3 loss to the Ottawa Senators in Game Five of the Eastern Conference finals. And the collective gasp from the 18,690 fans in HSBC Arena, the 10,000 fans standing in the plaza outside and every member of the team at seeing Daniel Alfredsson's game-winning goal in overtime preceded the sunken-head sigh.

The dream was over. "It's frustrating, because I don't think the group of guys we have here (was) ready for the season to be over," said Tim Connolly, whose play in the series was amazing, considering he missed all but two games of the regular season with post-concussion symptoms. "We thought we had a good enough team to go all the way, but they just got out to that 3-0 lead on us (in the series), and it's tough to dig yourself out of that. The way we were playing, we could have. If we scored in overtime, who knows what

would have happened. But it went the other way, and now it's all over."

From the beginning of the season, when the Sabres won their first 10 games, the expectations grew. The team that surprised so many teams last year by riding a wave of momentum into the playoffs and making it all the way to the Eastern Conference finals before losing to eventual Stanley Cup champion Carolina, suddenly found itself on the cup-or-bust highway.

Everywhere you went in Western New York, the Sabres' colors of blue and gold covered windows, cars, overpasses and the bodies of their fan base. Signs of "Go Sabres" and "One Team, One Goal" graced seemingly every building front from the Pennsylvania line to Lake Ontario.

This was the year Buffalo would finally celebrate a championship. But that's not how it works in sports. Heartbreak is inevitable.

"This one will take a while to sink in," said Jason Pominville, who struggled to hold back the tears in the locker room after the game. "I'll think about it for a little while, then look forward to next year. It's a tough thing to handle. We battled hard. We all pulled in the same direction, and we all meant well. It's disappointing to end this way."

Maybe the deepest pain the players and coaches feel this week is the sense that they let down the community that rallied



Ottawa's Chris Neil trips as he passes Buffalo goaltender Ryan Miller during the second period of Saturday afternoon's Game Five of the Eastern Conference Finals. The Sabres lost 3-2 in overtime and were eliminated from the Stanley Cup playoffs.

Photo by David F. Sherman

behind the team. Buffalo sold out every home game during the regular season, even the ones during the dreadful October snowstorm that plunged the region into darkness for up to two weeks.

The fans also shelled out money to make the new jerseys the hottest commodity in hockey. At the end of the season, seven of the top 10 selling jerseys belonged to Sabres.

"Right now, that's one of the parts that hurts so much, how awesome they were everywhere we went in the city," co-captain Daniel Briere said. "Just thinking about it gives

me goose bumps. It was something very special that we shared with the fans this year. I think it started building up last year, but it took another level this year that I didn't think was possible. Our fans were fantastic. That's one of the parts that hurts the most, the feeling that we let them down."

After Game Five, when the Sabres made their way back to the locker room to take off their uniforms one last time, the mood was as somber as a funeral. That's fitting, since the dreams died with an overtime tumbler that just missed the stick of goalie Ryan Miller.

"I think that there's a lot of disappointment right now," said coach Lindy Ruff, who is in the running to earn back-to-back NHL Coach of the Year awards.

"We asked them to put a lot of work in, and they put a lot of work in throughout the year," he said. "I think we had some struggles throughout the playoffs. Maybe part of it was that we had some guys coming off pretty tough injuries. Maybe we weren't quite as good as we needed to be. But at the same time, I think I'm going to stick with it. There's a lot to be proud of. Nobody wanted to lose, and there's going to be a grave feeling of letting everyone down, letting our fans down. The fans' support was absolutely tremendous, and the expectations were sky high. That room was as quiet as quiet could be."

No experience is a bad one if you learn something from it. And that's the message Chris Drury sent to his teammates after the season ended.

"I think, at some point, every team learns there are two different seasons," he said. "You have to do things in the postseason that Lindy calls out of character, things that you don't do as a team or as an individual during the year and get away with it. But you get this far and against a team like Ottawa, you're not going to get away with it not playing as hard as you can."

e-mail: mkrueger@beenews.com

Amherst
PEPSI
Center

A Town of Amherst
Recreation and Entertainment Center



Amherst's Premier Ice
and
Recreational Facility

**ADULT -
PRESCHOOL
SKATE**

**9:00AM - 10:40AM
Monday - Friday**

1615 Amherst Manor Dr. • Williamsville • 716-631-7555 • www.amherstpepsicenter.com
Join us for one of our many open skating sessions.