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HOCKEY

Sabres' skills challenge is geared toward thrilling fans

Autograph sessions with 27 alumni are on tap

By LANCE LYKOWSKI
NEWS WIRE SERVICES

On what would typically be a quiet practice day for the Buffalo Sabres, thousands of fans will gather inside KeyBank Center on Sunday for an event unlike any in franchise history.

The Sabres will host their first skills challenge at 12:30 p.m., when players will be split into two teams to compete in five events: the shootout, hardest shot, shooting accuracy, 3-on-1 power play and a puck control relay.

Twenty-seven alumni, including Dominik Hasek, Gilbert Perreault and Rene Robert, will sign autographs. As of Thursday night, more than 10,000 tickets had been sold despite the event being held on the NFL's wild-card playoff weekend. All proceeds will benefit the Buffalo Sabres Foundation.

Organizing such an event is no small feat given the Sabres' grueling schedule, which has forced coach Phil Housley and his staff to become creative on days between games.

"We don't want to disrupt their schedule," Rich Jureller, the team's vice president of community relations and president of the Sabres Foundation, said. "I don't ever want that to come back on us and have people say, 'Well, the team wasn't rested because they were doing community things.' At the same time, Jason [Botterill], Phil [Housley], Terry [Pegula] and Kim [Pegula] have been very, very generous. They understand these things are important, whether we're raising money or we're providing our fans with an opportunity. It's important we do it. The scheduling is always tenuous, but we get through it and I appreciate their support of it."

Jureller and his staff have brainstormed the idea of a skills challenge over the past few years because it is a low-cost, family-friendly event that al-



Sharon Cantillon/Buffalo News

Sabres Jeff Skinner, left, and Jason Pominville will be on opposite teams Sunday during the team's skills challenge at KeyBank Center. All proceeds from the event will benefit the Buffalo Sabres Foundation.

lows fans to engage with current and former players.

Other teams in the NHL, including the Vancouver Canucks, have received a positive response from their fan bases after holding similar events. The Sabres held an annual open practice at The Aud in the 1970s, which was extremely popular among fans.

When the league's schedule was released last summer, Jureller approached Botterill, the Sabres' general manager, and Housley to see when

the event could fit into the schedule.

The first three months of the season weren't ideal, so they agreed on Sunday, the first of two days between games. The Sabres will face the Boston Bruins tonight in TD Garden and won't play again until Tuesday against New Jersey in KeyBank Center.

Once a date was agreed upon, Jureller's staff began contacting Sabres alumni, many of whom still live in the area. Only Hasek, Robert and Perreault traveled to Buffalo from out of

town to attend the skills challenge.

Former players will be set up at various locations throughout the 100 and 200 levels of the arena from 11 a.m. until noon. Fans will receive a ticket to one autograph table, to which alumni will be randomly assigned. Doors open at 10:30 a.m.

"The timing also proved to be perfect. The Sabres announced the event Dec. 3, only four days after the team's 10-game winning streak ended. Tickets have sold at a rate of roughly 100

per day, according to Jureller.

Though the NHL All-Star Game has its critics, the weekend's annual skills competition is universally liked among hockey fans. Players also seem to enjoy the event — Chicago's Patrick Kane famously wore a Superman cape during the 2012 Super Skills Competition — and the Sabres are no different.

Their unusual first half of the season hasn't changed that. Entering play today, Buffalo had played 14 overtime games, including 10 in a 14-game span between Oct. 27 and Nov. 30.

This event offers a lighthearted break from the rigors of the season. Rookie center Casey Mittelstadt had yet to give much thought to which events he would compete in, but he was expecting the friendly trash talk between teammates to ramp up.

"I'm sure somehow it will get pretty competitive," Mittelstadt said. "It seems like it always does with us. Everyone wants to let loose, have the families around and have a little bit of fun."

Each player is expected to compete in two or three of the five events, and everyone will participate in the shootout. Points will be awarded to each team throughout.

Though he is unlikely to participate because of injury, Jack Eichel is captain of a team that includes Mittelstadt, Linus Ullmark, Vladimir Sobotka, Jason Pominville, Conor Sheary, Evan Rodrigues, Remi Elie, Marco Scandella, Jake McCabe, Matt Hunwick and Rasmus Ristolainen.

Jeff Skinner will captain Scott Wilson, Kyle Okposo, Johan Larsson, Sam Reinhart, C.J. Smith, Tage Thompson, Rasmus Dahlin, Zach Bogosian, Lawrence Pilut, Nathan Beaulieu and Carter Hutton.

"It's been really exciting," Jureller said. "It reaffirms the popularity of this team. ... It will be fun. There's a lot of skill on the team. This will showcase it."

Hasek wishes seniors a happy New Year



John Hickey/Buffalo News

Hasek returns: Hall of Fame and former Sabres goalie Dominik Hasek signs a shirt with the help of Linda Zynda, a staff coordinator at Buffalo Center, for Daniel Higgins in Buffalo on Friday. Hasek, who is in town for the Sabres' skills challenge, wished seniors a happy and healthy New Year.

NHL

Beauts will take on league-leading Boston for Kids Day

Pride have won four straight games

NEWS WIRE SERVICES

The Buffalo Beauts will continue their quest for the Isobel Cup today when the league-leading Boston Pride comes to the Harbor Center for a 1:30 p.m. game.

The meeting has been named the NWHL Twitter Game of the Week. Both squads know each other well; the Beauts and Pride squared off in the first two Isobel Cup champion-

ships in 2016 and 2017.

Boston (7-2) in its last game escaped with a 2-1 overtime victory over Stamford on Dec. 30.

Hayley Skarupa recorded the game-winning goal for the Pride. She leads the team with 11 points. Not far behind her is three-time Olympian Gigi Marvin, who has scored with nine points.

Marvin, 30, won a gold medal for the United States when she scored in a shootout against Canada last winter.

Marvin also won silver medals with the U.S. in 2014 and 2010.

Boston is on a four-game win streak with victories over the Connecticut Whale and Metropolitan Riveters, and two wins over the Minnesota Whitecaps.

The Pride scored five goals or more in three of those wins.

Nichols graduate Hayley Scamurra, who is from Williamsville, leads the Beauts (5-4) with 15 points.

Fellow Nichols graduate Madeline Elia, who was extended by the Beauts in the offseason, scored twice in Buffalo's last matchup with Boston.

She leads the team with six tal-

lies.

Elia also was named the VEDA Player of the Week after posting four points in Buffalo's 4-0 win over Minnesota on Sunday.

Both women are at the top of the NWHL leaderboards in scoring.

It will be Kids Day at the Harbor Center; children 15 and under can watch the game for \$5. Adults will pay the regular admission price of \$20.

There also will be a post-game party at 716 Food and Sport with the opportunity to meet Beauts players.

AHL

Nylander, Amerks win in shootout

NEWS WIRE SERVICES

Alexander Nylander scored the winning goal in the fifth round of a shootout Friday night as Rochester topped Laval, 3-2, to open a two-game American Hockey League series.

It was the second shootout win in as many games for the Americans, who are now 22-11-2 and still in first place in the North Division.

They also improved to 11-0 when tied after two periods. The loss dropped the Rocket to 14-16-3. They are in sixth place in the North.

Just as in Wednesday's game against Bridgeport, Rochester fell behind early when the Rocket's David Sklenicka got a shot past Amerks' goalie Scott Wedgewood.

Nylander tied the game at one goal apiece, but Laval regained its lead minutes later with a power-play goal by Alex Belzile.

Seconds before the second intermission, winger Judd Peterson tied the game 2-2 on a pass from Zach Redmond.

It was Peterson's first career goal and point in the AHL.

The score remained tied for the rest of regulation.

Victor Olofsson had a chance to end the game in overtime on a breakaway, but a highlight-reel save from Rocket goaltender Michael McNiven sent the game to the shootout.

McNiven ended the night with 32 saves.

Wedgewood stopped four out of five shots in the shootout. He finished with 22 saves.

Wayne Simpson scored in the second round of the shootout before Belzile solved Wedgewood in the third round.

Neither team scored in the fourth, and Nylander was able to hit paydirt in the fifth to win the game.

Penalties, which had been a problem in earlier games this season, were generally a nonfactor Friday.

Three Amerks were sent to the penalty box for high-sticking, tripping and interference, respectively. Laval's second goal came on a power play after Dalton Smith went to the box for interference.

Rochester and Laval will conclude their two-game series today at 3 p.m. at Place Bell in Laval, Quebec, Canada.

Rochester will return home for a series against the Toronto Marlies on Jan. 9.