



BUFFALO SABRES

Atlantic Division

Preseason Power Ranking **22**

x0

x3
EASTERN CONF

x1
PRESIDENTS'

1918
FRANCHISE WINS

39-37-6
84 Points
2023-24 SEASON

6th
DIVISION

Buffalo, NY - KeyBank Center (19,070)
Head Coach: Lindy Ruff (571-432-78-84, 17th Season - 1st year in second stint)

2023-24: Missed Playoffs

Young Core Gives Sabres Hope

It's been a long time since Buffalo Sabres fans have had much to cheer about. The team hasn't been to the playoffs since 2011, enduring some terrible seasons in the process, but things are starting to look up in western New York as the team has begun to develop a solid young core of players. Head coach Lindy Ruff led Buffalo to some of their most successful seasons in franchise history from 1997-2013 and the Sabres brought him back for a second stint in hopes that he can be the one to lead them back to the playoffs.

Alex Tuch



Photo via The Hockey Writers

Forwards

Buffalo found an offensive superstar when **Tage Thompson** exploded with 47 goals and 94 points during the '22-23 season. But an early injury last year hampered him and while he still managed to lead the team with 29 goals, his production dropped to just 56 points. Look for Thompson to have a bounce-back year and establish himself as an elite scoring option once again. **JJ Peterka** had a breakout year and scored 28 goals at the age of just 21 last year. If he can continue to ascend and become a legit top line option, Buffalo will benefit tremendously. **Alex Tuch** is an upstate New York native and the best years of his career have come with the Sabres. You can pencil him in for a 60-70 point season and there's potential for more, as he reached 79 points in '22-23 and is still in his prime.

The Sabres are the youngest team in the league, so it isn't a surprise that their entire second line is age 23 or younger. **Zach Benson** made his NHL debut at 18 last year and proved that he belonged, scoring 30 points. **Dylan Cozens** took a bit of a step back last season after a 30-goal season in '22-23, but the 7th overall pick in 2019 was still good for 47 points. **Jack Quinn** missed a lot of last season with an Achilles injury, but when on the ice had 19 points in 27 games. Assuming health, look for him to have a great year. **Ryan McLeod** joins Buffalo in a trade from Edmonton, adding another promising youngster to the team. The 24-year-old is coming off a 30-point season and used his speed to score 4 goals in the playoffs for the Oilers. **Jordan Greenway** is a physical forward who can contribute 30 points. **Jason Zucker** is the "old man" of the team at age 32 and as recently as '22-23, he scored 27 goals for Pittsburgh. It's unlikely he'll have that level of production again, but he'll be a solid third line forward and veteran leader for this young team. Former Cup champion **Nicolas Aube-Kubel** is a grinder who should bring some stability to the fourth line.

Defense/Goaltending

The Sabres selected **Rasmus Dahlin** 1st overall in 2018 and so far, he's been everything hoped for, quickly becoming one of the best offensive D-men in the league. He scored 20 goals last year (third-most among defensemen) and showed a physical edge with 195 hits. But Dahlin isn't the only 1st overall pick on Buffalo's defense; **Owen Power** was the top pick in 2021. He's 6'6" with great skating and scoring ability and his rookie year in '22-23 saw him lead all rookie defensemen in points. He followed that up with another solid season last year and he's still just 21. **Bowen Byram** was a trade deadline pickup from Colorado last year and he is another young defenseman with tons of potential and some playoff experience. He has struggled to stay healthy at times, but appeared rejuvenated once arriving in Buffalo with 9 points in only 18 games. **Connor Clifton** is a big hitter (205 last year) and solid defender (+12 in plus-minus). Injuries limited **Mattias Samuelsson** last season, but he continued to show promise.

Goaltending has been a struggle for Buffalo for years, with the team using a league-high 21 netminders since 2015. They seem to have finally found their goalie of the future after a breakout year from **Ukko-Pekka Luukkonen**. The Finn had a 2.57 GAA, .910 save percentage, and finished second in the NHL with five shutouts. Luukkonen continuing to bring stability between the pipes would go a long way to Buffalo taking the next step and becoming a playoff team. 22-year-old backup **Devon Levi** bounced around between the NHL and the minors last year and had a bit of a rough go in the big leagues. He has shown flashes of brilliance in the minors and in college, where he was third in the country in GAA during his sophomore season.

The Bottom Line

It's understandable to be skeptical of the Sabres as a team on the upswing. All of the losing in the last decade has meant that Buffalo has often had teams full of high draft picks. However, that influx of talent hasn't translated into winning in the past with many draft picks becoming busts or going on to greater success with other teams. But, this time feels different. Many of the Sabres' top prospects in recent years have already begun to produce at a high level in the NHL and the majority are still 25 or younger with lots of room for further growth. On top of that, the emergence of Luukkonen as a franchise goaltender gives Buffalo something they haven't had since Hall of Famer Ryan Miller left the team in 2014. The Atlantic Division is loaded with some of the elite NHL teams, so that league-long playoff drought might not get broken this year. But, buy some stock in the Sabres, it looks like this young core will bring a lot of success very soon.

2024-25 Projection: 40-36-6 (86 points) - 6th in Atlantic



