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Inside the tank: Sabres reporter recalls horrific, surreal season

By [Yahoo Sports Staff](#)
April 14, 2015 11:26 AM
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BUFFALO, NY - APRIL 01: Fans cheer as Tyler Ennis #63 of the Buffalo Sabres ...

(Ed. Note: The [Buffalo Sabres](#) have completed one of the most disappointing yet hopeful, logical yet controversial seasons in NHL history. Throughout the week, we'll publish different per-
spectives on the Tank That Was. Today, it's NHL.com correspon-
dent and long-time blogger Joe Yerdon on covering the Sabres
beat this season.)

By Joe Yerdon, Special for Puck Daddy

BUFFALO – When the rest of the hockey-loving world looks back on the 2014-2015 Buffalo Sabres season, the appreciation for just how historically bizarre it was should live on forever.

It should live forever because we're never going to see another like it by any team, anywhere, at any time ever again. I'm not say-
ing that because I had a front row seat for it; but when you step
away from the smoldering wreckage of the second straight sea-
son as the NHL's worst team, there are the individual stories and
happenings that made it happen.

The goal for the season was to secure 30th place and they did
that with flying colors, just like they did last season when it

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better than they were last season. They scored more goals than last season, and yet were still only two points worse than the Arizona Coyotes.

Yeah, the Coyotes, where their assistant general manager, Darcy Regier, is the guy who got all the losing started in Buffalo. Imagine the twist that could've played out had the Coyotes snaked out the Sabres for the best odds at Connor McDavid. A team with Regier landing McDavid, only it's not for the team where he reminded fans that "there's going to be some suffering" as they traded away every big star to rebuild.

Instead, the Sabres were one of the worst teams in NHL history when it came to just about everything. They were outshot by opponents to a historic level. They gave up 116 more goals than they scored and they only scored 153.

Tyler Ennis was the Sabres leading scorer and he had 46 points. That would've been enough to make him seventh on the Tampa Bay Lightning in points just ahead of Anton Stralman and two behind Valterri Filppula.

Ennis was also the only player on the Sabres to score 20 goals. Talk about persevering through madness, Ennis has proven in the past two seasons that if/when the Sabres rise from the muck of the tank years that he's the guy that will lead Sam Reinhart and either McDavid or Jack Eichel to glory. Enough can't be said for how well Ennis has played during his peak years with what's been a truly terrible team. If there was an award for being the MVP of the worst team, Ennis would win in a runaway.

But the most insane part about this season was that it was all by design.

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A photograph of Tim Murray, the new Buffalo Sabres general manager, at a press conference. He is wearing a dark suit and a blue tie, standing in front of a blue backdrop with the Sabres logo and Toyota logos. He is surrounded by several microphones from various media outlets, including ESPN and Fox Sports Net. He appears to be speaking or listening intently.

Tim Murray, center, the new Buffalo Sabres hockey team general manager, takes questions from the media at the First ...

Sabres GM Tim Murray padded his roster in the offseason with

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
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example for the rest of younger players won't be seen for a year or two at least, but when you're building a house you need a foundation and these guys are framework to hold the building blocks in place.

Of course, most of those building blocks didn't arrive in full until after the trade deadline when Chris Stewart, Torrey Mitchell, Brian Flynn and [Michal Neuvirth](#) were all sent out of town. Perhaps not coincidentally they were some of the hardest working players on the roster and there wasn't much return for all of them aside from goalie Chad Johnson who got injured shortly after joining the team and didn't play a game for the Sabres this season.

Then it was on young prospects like Johan Larsson, Mikhail Grigorenko, and Philip Varone to center the top three lines. All three guys spent the bulk of the season in those roles for the Rochester Americans and now they were leading the big club. That's a rough adjustment and a good way to test out where they're at in their development, but it also helped make sure the team was bound for the league's basement.

And that's not a knock against those players and the guys that played in Buffalo all season, they weren't put in the position to challenge for seventh place in the Atlantic Division, never mind a playoff spot. After all, Murray traded away both of his great goalies in Neuvirth and Jhonas Enroth during the season and brought in Anders Lindback and Johnson, who were in the midst of their worst seasons as professionals. He traded Tyler Myers and Drew Stafford away for Zach Bogosian and Evander Kane, a guy who wasn't going to play at all this season after shoulder surgery.

It's brilliant when you think about what the goal was. After all, if you're not doing your part to take advantage of the system, you're not really doing your job. Would there have been a medal of valor if the Sabres scratched and clawed their way to 28th or 27th in the league? Of course not, so if you're going to be bad, be bad enough to make sure you've got the best odds to land the biggest draft prize in 10 years.

As we found out on Sunday, the one guy who wasn't in line with all of those plans was Ted Nolan.

Poor Ted was in the worst position possible.

If Nolan motivated and coached the Sabres up the way he did his Latvian teams in the Olympics and World Championships and gets them to finish in the mid-20s he'd have (probably) made the front office furious for doing so. Instead, the team finished 30th despite his best efforts to coach them up and the ax still fell on him.

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
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Nolan wasn't consulted on trades at the deadline. He said the lines of communication weren't great either but that they had a "decent relationship."

Anyone that's heard Ted Nolan speak before knows that he would never be the type of coach to go along with just accepting losing. That's not how he's wired and he's too proud of a man to go along with it. That in itself makes you wonder how anxious things got in the final months of the season as the gap narrowed between the Sabres and Coyotes and Nolan rode his hot goalie no matter what whether it was Neuvirth or Lindback.

So you just wonder how things didn't mesh between Nolan and Murray. Murray said it may have just been a bad fit between he and Nolan, and that's fair to say since they were kind of thrown together during Pat LaFontaine's short tenure as President of Hockey Operations. But Murray did make him the head coach and he did sign him to a three-year extension.

Sometimes those relationships burn out fast, especially when there's an apparent goal to do everything completely opposite of how things are supposed to be done.

The season's been over for just two days as of this writing and already so much has happened. It's been less than a week since the Sabres lost to the [Columbus Blue Jackets](#) to ensure they would finish 30th and allow a fan base that's been ravaged by arguments over the ethics of competition after enduring the two worst seasons in franchise history to exhale.

God love the fans for putting up with this. After getting the warning shot from Regier after the Jason Pominville trade in 2013, "suffering" doesn't even begin to describe what's gone on with Sabres fans. Watching bad hockey is bad enough, but having that on top of the dilemma over whether it's kosher for a team to just fritter away a season losing virtually on purpose it's enough to make anyone want to throw their hands up and walk away.

But they don't walk away. If anything else, they were emboldened by the ethical debates. They were tantalized by the glimpses of greatness in the play of Ennis and Rasmus Ristolainen and by the tease of seeing Sam Reinhart and ultimately the reward of the even bigger prize in June at the draft, regardless of who it is.

I've said before that fans living on "hope" are playing it like *The Shawshank Redemption*. Hope is a dangerous thing, the way Red believes it, but it's also a good thing, maybe the best of things, as Andy Dufresne said. But it's hope that's driven the fans and the Sabres to, yes, suffer through a season like this.

To twist up the immortal words of Buffalo native Rick James for my own needs, "Hope is a hell of a drug."

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Joe Yerdon is a correspondent for NHL.com, a blogger at [Gross Misconduct](#) and a Noted Jerk. He can be found on Twitter [@JoeYerdon](#).

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