

Ovechkin Earns a Goal, and then an Ejection, as Caps Blank Sabres 2-0

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WASHINGTON, D.C.—Alexander Ovechkin is often the talk of the town after a Washington Capitals game, but Wednesday night the discussion was not about Ovechkin's scoring — though the winger did net his 17th goal of the season, which was the game-winner — but about his physical play. With Washington holding a tenuous 1-0 lead over the visiting Buffalo Sabres early in the third period, Ovechkin was given a major penalty for boarding and tossed by referee Kelly Sutherland after a heavy hit on Patrick Kaleta in the Sabres defensive zone.

Despite the significant man-disadvantage the Capitals held strong on the penalty kill and eventually downed the Sabres (12-7-2) 2-0 after Eric Fehr scored an insurance goal late in the third. Semyon Varlamov earned the shutout for Washington (14-5-6), his first of the season, stopping all 25 shots that came his way.

All in all it was a wacky night for the two teams. What was through two periods a penalty-free case of the referees "letting two fast-skating, smooth-skating teams play," in the words of defenseman Karl Alzner, turned into a third period shooting gallery against the Capitals, who were shorthanded five of the final 18 ½ minutes while not having a single power play.

"I've never seen that in my life, where one team doesn't have one power play," I've never seen a team not go 5-on-4. It was pretty strange," said Alzner, who played 30 games for the Capitals last season but was called up for the first time this season the Hershey (AHL) this season.

Both Buffalo and Washington entered Wednesday night's game on three-game losing streaks and it was obvious from the beginning that each squad was "gripping [their] sticks tight," according to Capitals Head Coach Bruce Boudreau.

Ovechkin gave Washington reason to relax just 6:24 into the game when, on the ice for an extra shift because teammate Matt Bradley was in the locker room, he added another strike to his lengthy highlight reel.

Gathering the puck in his own zone after a Buffalo scoring chance, Ovechkin dashed the length of the ice, swinging from the right side to the left boards and then cutting back across to the right once he was past the Sabres blue line. Eluding a poke check and then using rookie defenseman Tyler Myers as a screen, Ovechkin winged a wrist shot toward the far post and just under Sabres netminder Ryan Miller's blocker pad.

Miller, a favorite to earn significant playing time for Team USA in the 2010 Winter Olympics, was instrumental in keeping his team in the game as Washington outworked the Buffalo defense for numerous scoring chances.

Miller "made some unbelievable saves when we had some great chances," said Boudreau after the game.

Both teams benefitted from the quick run of play to demonstrate fancy moves and force both goaltenders to make big saves. In the second period Thomas Vanek nearly beat Varlamov with a deke to the right after forcing the goalie to shift, but Varlamov kicked out his left leg for the save. Later in the period, as time was about to expire, the Russian netminder was forced to make a pair of saves inside the crease Clarke Macarthur and then Drew Stafford on a Buffalo odd-man rush.

"He's unbelievable," Alzner said of Varlamov, who is 9-1-2 on the season. "He's one of the most athletic, hardest-working [players] he's been awesome and his record is reflecting it right now."

The win was Varlamov's first NHL regular season shutout, although he had two in last season's playoffs, and was Washington's first team shutout of the year.

Things appeared to take a turn for the worse for Washington when Ovechkin was penalized for his check on Kaleta 3:38 into the period. Ovechkin leveled Kaleta with a shoulder check just after the Sabres player cleared the puck out of the zone. Kaleta's head hit the glass and he immediately crumpled to the ice, but Boudreau was not convinced of the illegality of the hit after the game.

"We just watched it half a dozen times and he hits him in the shoulder; it might have warranted a two-minute penalty, but I don't think it warranted anything more than that," said Boudreau at the start of his press conference.

"He [Kaleta] did hit his head into the glass, but he was looking at [Ovechkin] and he saw him out of his eye and

Alex hit him in [the left] shoulder; he didn't hit the letters, he didn't hit the numbers," continued Boudreau, adding "I don't anticipate anything happening" in terms of supplemental discipline from the league.

After Ovechkin was sent to the locker room early in the third period, the Capitals faced a make-or-break five-minute penalty kill. The story of the team's previous few games had been of third period defensive letdowns, but the club was resolved to not let history repeat itself.

"I think it clicked in everybody's head, everybody knew they had to pick up just a little bit," said Alzner of Washington's mindset going into the penalty kill. "Ovie [Ovechkin] plays so many minutes and he's a huge part of this team, not only offensively but energy-wise. I think the guys did a great job picking up the slack."

Fehr, who served the penalty for Ovechkin, agreed: "The guys were fighting hard. We didn't let up. In the last couple of games we sat back and let the other team take the game to us. Tonight, we kept skating and kept moving our feet."

Washington's troubles were partly assuaged by a tripping call assessed to Buffalo's Craig Rivet 45 seconds into the major penalty, which meant the Caps were only down a man for three of the five minutes. Amazingly, the Capitals did not allow a single shot to reach Varlamov while they were shorthanded, and only two shots during the entire five minutes.

"I thought our penalty-killing in the third period was outstanding," said Boudreau.

Chris Clark nearly broke Buffalo's hearts when he hit the right post just 22 seconds after Ovechkin's major penalty ended. Shortly after that Mike Green took another penalty, for delay of game, and Varlamov made a pair of impressive point-blank saves on Derek Roy to preserve the lead.

Once again the Capitals had another fantastic scoring opportunity shortly after Green's penalty expired, and this time Fehr capitalized for the insurance goal. Center Brendan Morrison won an offensive zone faceoff to Green, who dumped the puck behind Buffalo's net. Morrison nabbed the puck, slipped behind to the other side of Miller's net and dished to Fehr, who knocked the bouncing puck inside the far post.

Vanek had one more brilliant opportunity on a wrist shot from the high slot with three minutes left, but Varlamov once more made the kick save to preserve his clean slate.

Washington has Thanksgiving off before traveling to Montreal to take on the Canadiens Saturday evening to kick off a two-week stretch in which the Capitals play eight of ten on the road. Montreal downed the Caps 3-2 in Washington when the two squads met last Friday night, and Washington will be keen to continue their winning ways and avenge that loss.

NOTES

-In perhaps the most-expected statistic of the season, Washington owned a lead in the second period or later for the 25th time in 25 games.

-Capitals great Peter Bondra was in attendance in his capacity of general manager of the Slovakia Olympic hockey team. Presumably Bondra was scouting a pair of Slovak defensemen in Wednesday's game, Washington's Milan Jurcina and Buffalo's Andrej Sekera, although Sekera was a healthy scratch.

-According to the Capitals media staff, the last time Washington did not have a power play in a game was April 13, 2002, against the New Jersey Devils. They lost that game 4-3, in overtime.