



The walking wounded are starting to return for the Blue Jackets and it has propelled the team to a four-game point streak. On Tuesday night, they beat the Edmonton Oilers in a shootout to win back-to-back games for the first time all season. Nine of the team's last 10 games have been decided by just one goal and four of them have gone to overtime. In a season where trying to find silver linings is the way to stay sane, the Jackets' effort level has been one of the most consistent elements of their game and it's starting to pay off.

A team's effort level is evident in several facets of the game. The Blue Jackets, who have the third-most penalty minutes in the league, rank seventh on the penalty kill at 85.2 percent. Jackets players have combined to throw 575 hits, an average of 25 per game, and block 253 shots this season. The unfortunate thing is that they lack the necessary talent to score goals and possess the puck more than the other team. The Jackets have also given up the first goal in 16 out of 23 games. It's hard to constantly play from behind.

Tuesday's feel-good win was a nice moment for the Blue Jackets, winning at home in front of the fans and picking up back-to-back victories. But, as is usually the case for the Jackets, it came with more concern. Steve Mason was pulled early in the second period after allowing his third goal on eight shots. The first goal of the night wasn't Mason's fault, a 60-foot screen shot from the point that he never saw. But, his positioning was off all night and his fundamentals have not returned to the form that helped the Blue Jackets into the playoffs in 2009. Sergei Bobrovsky replaced Mason and was terrific, but to call him a long-term solution is disingenuous.

President of Hockey Operations John Davidson is a former goaltender. Jarmo Kekäläinen is from Finland, where a lot of tremendous goaltenders have started their careers. As I mentioned in a previous column, the Jackets have Joonas Korpisalo in their prospect pool, a Finnish-born goaltender who played for the junior team in Jokerit, Finland, the team that Kekäläinen was the

general manager of before accepting the Columbus position. The Jackets also have Oscar Dansk, a Swedish-born goaltender. They may use Bobrovsky to bridge the gap until one of those two is ready, which would mean re-signing him this summer.

One of Scott Howson's big mishaps as the GM of the Blue Jackets was the snap judgment he made in signing Steve Mason to a contract extension. Mason is in the final year of that contract and will be a restricted free agent, but it wouldn't be surprising to see the Jackets move on with the new regime at the helm.

Another decision that has to be explored centers around the [NHL's amnesty clause](#) . To help teams who will be hurt by the new salary cap agreed to in the collective bargaining agreement that ended the lockout, teams can buy out two of their players over the next two summers to comply with the cap. The buy out removes the player from the salary cap, but they will still get paid two-thirds of the money they are owed. It would seem unlikely that the Blue Jackets would need to go this route, as they are nowhere near the salary cap, but with Davidson and Kekäläinen tasked with overhauling the roster, the Blue Jackets may need resources.

To me, RJ Umberger is the perfect amnesty candidate. Umberger shined as a gritty player with talent on a bad team. Prior to the lockout, Scott Howson re-signed the 30-year-old Umberger to a five year, \$23M extension. Umberger has seven points in 23 games this season, but the bigger issue has been how he looks overall. Umberger chose not to play during the lockout and was an assistant coach with his alma mater at Ohio State. Initially, his sluggish skating and slow start could have been attributed to some rust. But, now, as Umberger continues to struggle, the effort level and the production just don't appear to be there.

For next season, the Blue Jackets are projected to have \$39.7M in guaranteed contracts. The salary cap is \$64.3M. The number of guaranteed contracts does not include restricted free agents Artem Anisimov, Matt Calvert, Cam Atkinson, Colton Gillies, Steve Mason, Sergei Bobrovsky, or Cody Goloubef. Mark Letestu and Vinny Prospal are unrestricted free agents that the Jackets will be interested in retaining. After next season, the restricted free agent list grows to include Ryan Johansen, Derick Brassard, Tim Erixon, John Moore, and Dalton Prout. That doesn't include possible free agent signings. The Jackets appear to be good financial shape, but that could change in a hurry and prompt a decision on Umberger either this summer or next.

The NHL trade deadline is four weeks away, so the Jackets, who are undoubtedly sellers, will be regulars in the rumor mill. Looking at the contract stuff above and considering that the better

Blue Jackets players are signed to long-term deals, like Fedor Tyutin, Jack Johnson, and James Wisniewski, it seems unlikely that the Blue Jackets will make a big splash at the deadline. It won't be from lack of effort, but rather a lack of tradable assets.

In any event, the season drags on as the Blue Jackets appear to be destined for another top three pick in the NHL draft. The team continues to be competitive, as they have lost 16 of 23 but have just a -16 goal differential. They have garnered 13 of 24 points at home and are playing with some pride in spite of their record.

Again, silver linings.

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A brief update on the Lake Erie Monsters who continue to struggle...

The Monsters have lost four of their last six after snapping an eight-game losing streak back on February 21. They would still make the playoffs if the playoffs began today, but their 59 games played is tied for the most in the conference. Rochester (54 games played) and Oklahoma City (55) are just two points behind the Monsters in the standings. Chicago, who is tied with the Monsters for sixth with 63 points, has only played 53 games. The Monsters are one point behind division-leading Toronto, but Toronto has played five fewer games.

The Monsters host Peoria on Thursday as the final game of their eight-game homestand. They play at Grand Rapids on Saturday.