



The NHL is rapidly approaching the final month of its condensed regular season and the April 3 trade deadline is already less than a week away. The Western Conference standings are ridiculously tight, while the Eastern Conference playoff picture looks quite a bit clearer. Every team in the Western Conference enters play on Thursday night with either 15 or 16 games to play, so the race for the postseason is on.

One of the most exciting parts of the NHL season is the trade deadline, but this season could be a lot different. Two of the biggest trade chips, Brendan Morrow and Jarome Iginla, have already been traded and both have been traded to the Pittsburgh Penguins. In the Western Conference, the #9-#14 seeds are within six points of the eighth seed, the final playoff slot in the conference. In the Eastern Conference, the #9-12 teams are within five points of a playoff spot.

The issue for the teams on the outside looking in is that it's nearly impossible to jump over teams with so many overtime games and every game being played within the conference. Of the 243 games that have been played in the Western Conference through March 27, over 27 percent of them have gone to overtime, which means both teams get at least one point in the standings. With more than one out of every four games going to overtime, and the teams bunched together in the standings, a lot of teams still have a chance at the playoffs, but the road to get there is full of obstacles.

What league-wide parity will do to the next six days leading up to the trade deadline could create a very stagnant market. Teams will have to make very difficult decisions on their future and something as simple as a three-game winning streak could greatly improve their playoff chances with so few games left to play. The trade market does not appear to have a lot of sellers, though it would be in some teams' best interest to plan for the future.

In that respect, the Columbus Blue Jackets are in a very precarious spot. Of their 15 remaining home games, the Jackets, who have lost 11 out of 14 on the road, will play 10 of their final 15 games away from Nationwide Arena, including six of the last seven games of the season. The play of Sergei Bobrovsky could give the Blue Jackets hope in a playoff series, but they are the worst offensive team in the Western Conference and would be at a severe disadvantage in any playoff series.

In a soft trade market, the Blue Jackets could be in a position to maximize their tradable assets. But, the Blue Jackets have gotten a lot of support from the fan base and have played quite well over the last month. However, they are three points out of a playoff spot, with two teams in between them and the eighth seed. With the schedule ahead of them, the right play is to plan for the future. It's a hard decision for President of Hockey Operations John Davidson and newly-named General Manager Jarmo Kekäläinen. A playoff run and the experience of fighting in the last two weeks for a playoff spot would provide invaluable experience for their young players. Falling short and picking outside the top 10 in the NHL Entry Draft would also be a disastrous outcome.

For the Blue Jackets to come as far as they have this season is a mammoth achievement. After 15 games, the Blue Jackets were 4-9-2. Over their last 18 games, they are 9-4-5. Sure, 9-4-5 over 18 games is just a .500 record, with nine wins and nine losses, but sustained .500 play looked like a long shot for this team earlier in the season. When the Blue Jackets started their franchise record 12-game point streak on February 26, they were 5-12-2 and one of their worst teams in the league. Over their last 14 games, they have lost in regulation just once.

It's been a season of tremendous growth to date and that's important for a young team. It may not be over yet and they may continue to play well enough to remain a factor. But, if an opportunity presents itself to trade away a player in a soft trade market where the Blue Jackets could get more value from a desperate team, it's an opportunity that they cannot pass up.

Hockey pundits are torn on exactly how strong the 2013 draft class is, but it is expected to be a better class than both 2011 and 2012. For an organization that has to look towards the future, especially with a move to the more travel-friendly Eastern Conference, accumulating draft picks is the way to go, even if the team isn't ready to get off the ride that has been the 2013 season.

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A brief update on the Lake Erie Monsters, whose playoff hopes continue to fade by the day. The Monsters are now three points out of the final playoff spot in the Western Conference, with three teams ahead of them vying for that spot. The Monsters also have just nine games left in the season. With the second-most games played in the conference, there is no margin for error and it appears that the Monsters will fall short of the postseason for the second straight year.

One positive sign in recent times was the return of Colorado's 2010 first round draft pick, Joey Hishon. Hishon was concussed in the 2011 Memorial Cup, the four-team round robin tournament played between the top team in the Ontario Hockey League, the Quebec Major Junior Hockey League, the Western Hockey League and the tournament host team. Hishon returned to the Monsters lineup on March 19. In four games, he has one assist.