



Two months ago, I would have told you it was impossible. The Columbus Blue Jackets were 5-12-2 and had taken their projected spot near the bottom of the Western Conference standings. Since that time, an incredible transformation has taken place and the Jackets are on the cusp of securing their second playoff berth in franchise history. Since February 24, the Jackets have posted a 17-5-5 record and currently hold the final playoff spot in the Western Conference.

The Blue Jackets resurgence this season is a testament to what hard work and belief can do in professional sports. Most would agree that the Blue Jackets are easily in the bottom third of the league in terms of talent and skill, as evidenced by having the league's worst powerplay. The Jackets are barely breaking even in terms of 5-on-5 goals for and goals against. The key to the team's success is their effort level, which has been a nightly staple of this team since the first night of the condensed season.

More often than not, a team is only as good as their goaltender and Sergei Bobrovsky has been a good one. The acquisition of Bobrovsky in June 2012 for a second-round pick and a fourth-round pick has gone better than anyone could have ever imagined. Bobrovsky is garnering a lot of attention for the Vezina Trophy for the league's top goaltender and has even been mentioned in the running for the Hart Trophy for league Most Valuable Player. Bobrovsky is fifth in goals against average, second in save percentage, and is tied for second in shutouts with four. Since the start of March, Bobrovsky is 16-5-3 with all four of his shutouts and just 39 goals allowed in 24 games.

Along with having a high compete level, the Blue Jackets do a lot of the little things required to win games. They rank sixth in faceoff percentage, have allowed the seventh-fewest powerplay goals, and are averaging 13 blocked shots per game. Working with little margin for error

because of the lack of offense, the team has been forced to play a full 60-minute game in all three zones and they deserve to be where they are for the amount of effort they put forth.

The job that Todd Richards has done has been incredible. It appeared early in the season that the team, and by extension, Richards, was playing tight with the front office change and the uncertainty. After about a month, things settled down and Richards has done a tremendous job leading the Jackets into contention. He will undoubtedly be a finalist for the Jack Adams Award for the NHL's top coach and will probably get a contract extension from President of Hockey Operations John Davidson.

Unfortunately, the Blue Jackets do not control their own destiny. The Detroit Red Wings trail by one point in the standings and hold the first tiebreaker. The Wings have three games remaining and the Jackets have two left. If the Red Wings win out or win two games and lose one in overtime, the Blue Jackets will fall short and have their terrible start to blame. If the Red Wings lose any game in regulation and the Jackets win both of their remaining games, they will secure their second playoff berth in franchise history and have a first-round date with the Chicago Blackhawks.

It all comes down to these final two games and getting a little bit of help. The Jackets play in Dallas on Thursday and host Nashville on Saturday in the season finale. The Red Wings host Los Angeles on Wednesday and Nashville on Thursday before finishing the season in Dallas on Saturday.

Obviously, with a 5-12-2 start, even being in this position is a major step in the right direction for the Blue Jackets. Whether they make the playoffs or not, the impact for next season and future seasons will be noticeable. Either the young players on the team will come back motivated for next season to avoid a similar fate of missing the playoffs or they'll get that taste of making the playoffs and thirst for more. The experience that the team has gained from this late season surge is invaluable and is another sign of how things are looking very promising in Columbus and how close the team is to being a perennial contender, especially with a very experienced, very knowledgeable front office.

It will be a wild ride this week as the NHL's condensed 48-game schedule comes to a close. Along with the Blue Jackets fighting for a playoff spot, three teams are in the hunt for the final two playoff spots in the Eastern Conference. The Ottawa Senators and the New York Rangers are currently holding down those spots with 52 points. The Winnipeg Jets are on the outside

looking in with 51 points and just one game to play. Seeding is also up for grabs in both conferences.

The playoff schedule is expected to be announced over the next couple of days and the playoffs will begin likely the middle of next week.

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A final update on how the Lake Erie Monsters finished their season. The Monsters finished 11th in the 15-team AHL Western Conference with a 35-31-3-7 record. They finished the season by winning seven of their last 10 games. AHL rookies Andrew Agozzino and Mike Sgarbossa led the Monsters in points with 52 and 44, respectively. Calvin Pickard was excellent in net for the Monsters with a 20-19-5 record, a .918 save percentage, and a 2.47 goals against average.