



The Lake Erie Monsters and their parent club, the Colorado Avalanche, have agreed to a multi-year extension, continuing their partnership which was set to expire at the end of next season. Per NHL and AHL policy, the terms of the agreement were not disclosed. The Monsters and Avalanche have been affiliates since the team began play back in 2007. The Monsters replaced the Cleveland Barons, a former affiliate of the San Jose Sharks.

**Background of the affiliation:** The Monsters were formerly the Utah Grizzlies. Dan Gilbert bought the rights to the team in May 2006 and the Monsters started in October of 2007. Colorado had been affiliated with the Hershey Bears. Twenty-two players have come through Cleveland and then experienced the NHL in Colorado. Fourteen current Avalanche players were one-time Monsters. Both head coach Joe Sacco and assistant coach Sylvain Lefebvre previously held the same positions with the Monsters.

The purpose of the American Hockey League is to be primarily a feeder league for the NHL. It is a chance for some European players to get accustomed to the North American game and a chance for collegiate players to familiarize themselves with the quicker pace. In that respect, the Monsters have done everything asked of them by the Colorado front office.

**What this means in the near future:** The biggest thing for Cleveland hockey fans is that this means stability. The team draws well, though actual attendance figures are certainly inflated for weekday games and afternoon weekend contests. But, with the Cavaliers, Dan Gilbert's commitment to the city and the arena, as well as the niche market in Cleveland for hockey, the Monsters will be a long-term staple in the American Hockey League and the city of Cleveland.

The attendance figures have climbed each year since the inaugural 2007-08 season. Notable

promotions like “Pink the Rink” night in honor of breast cancer awareness, the Shaq bobblehead, and appearances by Josh Cribbs, Jamarion Moon, and Miracle on Ice goaltender Jim Craig have brought good numbers to the gate.

Many people, me included, were beginning to hypothesize an affiliation agreement between the Columbus Blue Jackets and the Lake Erie Monsters. The Monsters contract with Colorado was set to expire next year. The Blue Jackets recently signed a one-year contract with the Springfield (Mass.) Falcons, with a mutual option for a second year. Obviously, that will not happen now and the Monsters seem very content with their Rocky Mountain parent club.

The team should continue to thrive due to the amount of ticket promotions and their expansive promotional schedule. Many businesses that own corporate seats and suites also have Monsters tickets as a part of their Cavaliers packages. The Monsters are also active in the community and do two practices per month at local area rinks.

**What this means long-term:** It means several things, none of which hinder the Lake Erie Monsters. The repercussions of this new affiliation contract may be detrimental to the Columbus Blue Jackets. Skepticism has been the theme of the fan in Columbus in terms of hockey. The Blue Jackets have one playoff appearance in a decade. Attendance figures have steadily gone down and the team lost season ticket holders by the handful. The prospect of having Cleveland as an affiliate should have been an attractive idea to the Jackets’ front office.

Now, that is impossible. An affiliation with their I-71 friends to the north could have been highly beneficial to the franchise. It could have increased interest with the Cleveland hockey market and potentially brought a Blue Jackets home date to Cleveland. The state of the franchise has been in flux with a bad arena agreement and underachieving teams.

Inherently, Columbus had trouble drawing interest in Cleveland. Many Cleveland hockey fans were already fans of Detroit, Buffalo, or Pittsburgh because their fandom began prior to Columbus’s 2000-01 inaugural season. The growth of the Cavaliers from 2003-present also hurt the Blue Jackets because their television coverage superseded the Blue Jackets on Fox Sports Ohio and kept Clevelanders’ attention elsewhere.

Overall, however, the affiliation agreement with the Avalanche is the best-case scenario for the

Monsters. The Jackets were often criticized by their previous affiliate in Syracuse for not helping the team monetarily and not having a commitment to getting veteran players to help with the development process. The Monsters opened the season with several AHL veterans and a couple guys with NHL experience to play alongside their talented crop of youngsters.

As referenced above, the partnership has worked to date. The Avalanche made the playoffs last year with several former Monsters on the roster and were led there by the Monsters former head coach. A new contract, a willingness to help the Monsters achieve, and rising attendance figures are creating a perfect partnership that the city of Cleveland should continue to embrace.