



With all the talk on basketball's March Madness, March Madness in the NHL is starting to reach a very critical point. Teams are getting down to less than 15 games remaining and the playoff race in the Western Conference is as congested and exciting as ever. Unfortunately, the Blue Jackets are not a part of it and need to begin looking at the future.

Deciding to be a buyer instead of a seller, trading away a key component of the team in exchange for financial flexibility and a couple solid players has gone reasonably well for Scott Howson. Scottie Upshall has four goals in eight games with the Jackets and Sami Lepisto is one of two defensemen on the team who is a plus rather than a minus.

However, as the Jackets sit seven points out with 12 games to play and four teams to jump over, the prospect of making the playoffs this year is very slim. What has gotten Columbus to this point after jumping out to a pretty decent start? Young inconsistency and a lack of depth is a good starting point. Rather than breakdown the roster now and start looking at 2011-2012, because there are still games to be played and something shocking could happen, let us take a look at how the Jackets compare to other teams.

With so much parity in the league, depth should be every general manager's chief concern. The top teams in each conference are there because they have depth at every position. Columbus is lacking in the depth department. First, at forward, the Blue Jackets have just two players with over 50 points. Their highest defenseman has 26. This simply will not cut it. The rules instituted in the CBA a few years ago opened up the game and took the clutching and grabbing out of it. For a defenseman to have a team-high 26 points cannot be tolerated when the game is so much about transition and speed.

Some teams can get away with this because they have good goaltending or focus on a defensive style of play. Columbus has marginal goaltending and no real style of play. They want to be a puck control team without the bodies to do so. They lack the speed, and talent on defense, to be a transition-based team. Basically, the Jackets are caught in between ideologically. The other teams in the playoff hunt in the West have strong systems in place and have had them for a while because they have tenured head coaches.

Teams are able to compete nightly because they develop an identity for themselves. The Blue Jackets have not done that this season. The Buffalo Sabres are what they are. A fast team with a world-class goaltender. The Carolina Hurricanes are a defensively sound squad built on one line of scoring and plenty of savvy veterans. The Calgary Flames are a grind-it-out, physical team who wins low scoring games. The Anaheim Ducks play a speed game that gets the defensemen involved. The Nashville Predators play a responsible game, keeping shot totals low and focusing on defense first.

What style do the Blue Jackets play? Nobody really knows. Their roster has no definitive style of play. There are a couple big guys on enforcer lines, a couple speed guys, and the defensemen are all over the map. This is not the recipe for success in the NHL. You need to have a set style of play in place and then build off that.

Part of it was the coaching change to Scott Arniel. As the year progressed, however, Arniel shifted off what he preached in training camp. He preached offensive flow and creativity. He preached allowing the young players to play and to make mistakes. When the league adjusted to the Jackets in December, they were allowing too many goals, too many shots, and too many scoring chances. As a result, looking at the [team's ranking in the major team stat](#) categories, the Blue Jackets are in the middle of the pack in damn near all of them. You cannot be a good team in the NHL if you are mediocre at everything. You have to excel at something and then make it your own.

That is one of the challenges facing the Blue Jackets. Identity is developed through adversity in the NHL. Mainly, by facing adversity in crunch time. By crunch time, the Blue Jackets are beginning to make tee times. Creating an identity hitting a sand wedge on the ninth hole does not happen. The challenge lies with the Scotts, both Arniel and Howson, to form an identity for this team. Until that happens, Nationwide Arena might as well cover the ice surface from mid-April to September every year.

Other news from around the NHL:

The St. Louis Blues and their American Hockey League affiliate in Peoria are [for sale](#) and so is the arena they play in. Talks fell through with the major ownership group, TowerBrook Capital Partners, and there are no new buyers on the horizon. With the already iffy situation in Phoenix, constant rumors about the Southeast teams moving, this is certainly a concern. The Blues have a rich history in the NHL and a fairly decent hockey market. Too many hands in the jar and too many people attempting to make ownership decisions have finally reached a boiling point and that is the reason that the team is for sale.

The league's GMs have been meeting in Boca Raton, FL for the annual GM meetings. Topics of conversation have focused on player safety, concussion precautions, and enhancing video replay.

The Vancouver Canucks have already clinched the Northwest Division championship with 10 games to play. They have all the pieces to make a very deep run, if they stay healthy. They also have an 11-point lead on Detroit for home ice throughout the Western Conference Playoffs.

The New Jersey Devils improbable playoff run continues. They are six points out in the East and still winning one goal games at a ridiculous rate. It would be a tremendous way for Martin Brodeur to go out, if he decides to. Lead the team on a crazy playoff run, upset a couple teams, and maybe even make it deep in the playoffs.

And finally, in absolutely phenomenal news, Max Pacioretty has told the Canadiens that he is [concussion-symptom free](#) and just waiting on his fractured neck to heal. Mike Johnson, an NHL analyst in Toronto, [reported](#) that MaxPac will be cleared for full contact in 3-5 weeks.

For what it's worth, the GMs voted 24-6 that the Chara/Pacioretty incident was a "hockey play"

and warranted no supplemental discipline.

A minor league update on the Lake Erie Monsters:

The Monsters picked a great time to play well on the road. With wins over Hamilton and Toronto last weekend in Canada, the Monsters basically control their own destiny. Four points separate first place Manitoba with fourth place Lake Erie. The top three teams in the division will make the playoffs. LEM has two games in hand on Manitoba and three games in hand on Toronto.

Hamilton's two top scorers, Nigel Dawes and Aaron Palushaj were just recalled by Montreal to help LEM's cause.

Upcoming schedules:

Columbus: 3/17 v. DET, 3/19 @ MIN, 3/20 v. NJ, 3/22 @ COL

Lake Erie: 3/18 @ Grand Rapids, 3/19 @ Milwaukee, 3/20 @ Peoria