



The Columbus Blue Jackets have been eliminated from playoff contention for a while. But, in the world of professional sports, the evaluation is never done. Some players on the Jackets have been thrust in to elevated roles with Rick Nash missing a bulk of the last week and Jan Hejda being suspended for a questionable hit.

The team has won just three games since February 25. They have come against Carolina, a possible playoff team, Minnesota, and Florida, two teams who really had no shot at making the postseason. The Jackets have just two players with 20 goals and just two players with 50 points. Even though the season has been over, the Jackets roster as it is currently constructed gets a failing grade in both the heart and talent department.

Jake Voracek and Derick Brassard have underachieved. Kristian Huselius remains a bust, though he was injured for most of the season. These three players were supposed to provide scoring help for Rick Nash. They have not done that. The question now is what do the Jackets do with them? Derick Brassard makes \$3.2M per season. Jake Voracek is up for contract this offseason. Voracek still has plenty of untapped potential, but the Blue Jackets have free agent needs.

Sami Lepisto will be on his way out. That trade now looks like a good salary dump for the Blue Jackets. Scottie Upshall has been mediocre for the team, while Lepisto has struggled. The money saved from trading Klesla will likely go to re-signing Jan Hejda and perhaps adding a bargain bin, physical defenseman in free agency.

In terms of players signed for next season, Samuel Pahlsson is an interesting name. Pahlsson is due to make \$2.625M next season in the final year of his contract. He has underachieved in his role as a shutdown center and good faceoff guy. There are always markets for players like Pahlsson. The Jackets may look to trade him, hoping to acquire a third round draft pick or a minor league prospect.

Next year may be a make or break year for Nikita Filatov. It is the last year of his entry-level contract and he reaches restricted free agency in the offseason. Would anybody be willing to sacrifice draft picks to offer Filatov a contract? I would say no. Therefore, either Filatov gets traded or becomes a never-was in the NHL and goes back to Russia to play.

Nobody will take Kristian Huselius's large price tag unless the Jackets eat a bad contract in return. It could be a possibility, but Huselius will likely just play out his final year in Columbus and then take a severe pay cut in the offseason.

On defense, only three defensemen are signed for next year- Mike Commodore, Kris Russell, and the final year of Fedor Tyutin's contract. Clitsome, Stralman, and Methot are restricted free agents. John Moore is signed, but no certainty that he breaks camp with next year's team.

Basically, in summation, the offseason will be very interesting for the Jackets. They'll be picking in the top ten again with a chance to take another impact player. Ryan Johansen, their first round pick from last year's draft, will make the team in October. The goal will be to find another almost NHL-ready player such as Johansen at this year's draft.

### **Other news from around the NHL:**

Look for my 2011 Playoff Primer next Wednesday, in lieu of the regular Thursday article. I was going to write it up for this week, but too many playoff matchups are undecided.

That said, there are ten teams locked in so far. Six from the East and just four from the West. The biggest storyline for me entering the playoffs is how Vancouver will respond to not having to play any big pressure games for a while now. They locked up the President's Trophy for most

points a week ago and have been on cruise control. Look no further than the Washington Capitals for what happens to teams on cruise control when they hit the playoffs.

For all the parity in the NHL over the last few years, the same group of teams is bottom feeders this year. Columbus, Edmonton, Colorado, Atlanta, and Florida. Sprinkle in New Jersey who got off to a horrendous start and Ottawa whose core group has just aged and their glory years are behind them.

### **A minor league update on the Lake Erie Monsters:**

With a full playoff preview next week, I'd rather take the time to look at what the Monsters have done this season. They clinched their first playoff berth in franchise history thanks to Hamilton's 2-1 win over Abbotsford on Tuesday night.

What they have done since January is nothing short of incredible. With all the player movement and continuity issues that minor league teams face, the Monsters have gone 28-12-1 since January 1. A remarkable feat to win essentially 70% of their games in the second half of the year.

They control their own destiny in the North Division. With three games remaining this weekend, they can win out and win the Division. They hold the tiebreaker over both teams in the event that the Monsters tie with one of Manitoba or Hamilton in points.

The Monsters will either play Manitoba, Hamilton, or the fifth-place team from the West Division.

### **Upcoming schedules**

**Columbus:** 4/9 @ NSH, 4/10 v. BUF

**Lake Erie:** 4/8 @ Rockford, 4/9 v. Abbotsford, 4/10 @ Rochester