The National Hockey League's lockout definitely sours the month of October for hockey fans, but not everyone is going to be upset with what's going on at the NHL level. Fans in American Hockey League cities are thrilled at the opportunity the lockout has presented. The quality of the product is sure to go up this season as several of the NHL's top young players will be participating in hockey's top minor league level. Like so many teams in the AHL, the Lake Erie Monsters will benefit from their parent club, the Colorado Avalanche, not starting the season on time.

After making the playoffs during the 2010-11 season, the Lake Erie Monsters fell short last season, finishing two points out of the final playoff spot in the Western Conference. Dealing with a rash of injuries, both in Cleveland and in Colorado, and having players called up to the NHL, the Monsters leading scorer, Evan Brophey, had a measly 39 points. Five different goaltenders split the 76-game schedule. Forty-nine different players put on Monsters sweaters and it led to a lack of continuity on the team.

The season begins for the Monsters on October 12 with the Oklahoma City Barons in town. They'll also host the Barons on Saturday afternoon before heading out on a four-game, two-week road trip. With the way that the AHL schedule is constructed, trying to maximize weekend home dates and cut down on travel expenses, it is always a grueling season. AHL teams often play on Fridays, Saturdays, and Sundays, with only a handful of weekday games. Due to scheduling, even with a 76-game schedule, the Monsters won't play their regular season finale until April 20.

Entering this season, the Monsters have to be happy with their chances. Despite the overall strength of the league increasing due to some of the players who have been assigned to the AHL during the lockout, the Monsters have more talent on defense than ever before and two very promising, highly-touted goaltenders that should get the bulk of the work. With the philosophy of the Colorado Avalanche to build around speed and skill at forward, the Monsters will again be fairly small up front, but very fast.

The forwards will be anchored by Mark Olver and Mike Connolly. Both Olver and Connolly played for the Monsters last season and are very gifted players. It will be up to those two to help along 20-year-olds Michael Sgarbossa and Mitchell Heard. Heard was the Avalanche's second-round pick in the 2012 NHL Entry Draft. Joey Hishon is another interesting name in the fold for the Monsters this season. Hishon, a former first-round draft pick of the Avalanche in 2010, would be the most talented player on the roster, but he is attempting to work his way back from concussion-related symptoms. Hishon missed all of last season, so the Avalanche will be sure to keep close tabs on him if he does return.

The two strengths of the Monsters will be goaltending and defense. The sky is the limit for these two units, and with a lot more talent playing in the AHL ranks during the lockout, they will definitely be tested. In net, the Monsters will use the tandem of Calvin Pickard and Sami Aittokallio. Pickard, a second-round draft pick in 2010, and Aittokallio, a fourth-round draft pick that same year, will give fans something to watch all season long. Their progress will be fun to track, as Monsters fans have seen a revolving door of AHL regulars tending the net for the last few seasons. Now, they will get to see a couple of guys who could have NHL futures.

Helping Pickard and Aittokallio will be one of the strongest defense corps in the Western Conference. With help from the lockout, 2009 draft picks Stefan Elliott and Tyson Barrie will start the season with Lake Erie. Barrie had 32 points in 49 games last season and Elliott, who was a big part of the late push from the 2011 playoff team, had 14 points in 30 games. Joining them will be Karl Stollery, an undrafted free agent out of Merrimack College who had seven points in nine games with the Monsters at the end of his collegiate season last year, Cameron Gaunce, a player Monsters fans are very familiar with, and Thomas Pock, a 31-year-old Austrian native, making his return to North America. Pock has played 118 NHL games in his career, a couple hundred AHL games, and was impressive in the Swedish Elite League last season.

The lockout will give AHL fans an opportunity to see some visiting players that they probably would not have seen otherwise. Speficially for Monsters fans, with the Monsters playing the vast majority of their games against the Western Conference, some of the players that may make appearances in Cleveland include: Ryan Nugent-Hopkins, Jordan Eberle, and Magnus Paarjarvi-Svensson (Oklahoma City/Edmonton), Mikael Granlund (Houston/Minnesota), Zack Kassian (Chicago/Vancouver), Sven Bartschi (Abbotsford/Calgary), Cody Hodgson and Zemgus Girgensons (Rochester/Buffalo), and a slew of others in the Eastern Conference, including Adam Henrique and Adam Larsson (Albany), Sean Couturier (Adirondack), Oliver Ekman-Larsson and Brandon Gormley (Portland), and Alexander Burmistrov (St. John's). Nearly all of those players are former first-round picks and many of them would have never set

foot in the AHL if not for the lockout.

As far as the Monsters season goes, the lockout could dictate a lot of what happens. In terms of forward depth, there isn't a whole lot. If Olver and Connolly, or somebody else, were to be recalled to Colorado, the team's offense would likely suffer. There is a lot of depth on defense, but Elliott and Barrie are game-changers and very experienced. The goaltenders will likely be here all season long, as neither one has experience above juniors. The Avalanche would be gunshy about throwing either Pickard or Aittokallio into the fire if an injury did occur.

All in all, it should be a fun season to get down to Quicken Loans Arena and watch some games. With better talent league-wide and the AHL serving as the dominant hockey league in North America until the lockout is settled, it should make for a great product on the ice.