With the lockout in the rearview mirror, the rush is on to get the season started and put together a 48-game schedule to begin by January 19. The condensed schedule will be difficult on the players, especially the ones who chose not to play during the lockout, and will force the NHL season to go longer than ever before.

John Shannon of Sportsnet reports that the NHL season will conclude on April 27 and playoffs could run as long as June 28, which was supposed to be the first night of 2013 NHL Entry Draft. That means 48 games in 99 days for the regular season and then another two months of playoffs for the Stanley Cup Finals participants. The NHL trade deadline is projected to be the first week of April. Keep in mind that a lot of teams share a cable sports network with the Major League Baseball team in that city, which will make for a lot of headaches for the networks.

Teams will only play the other teams in their conference, which will benefit most of the league, but Columbus, Detroit, and Winnipeg will not enjoy their schedules. Those three teams will have the hardest travel schedules because of their geographic location. Training camps are expected to open on January 13, so it will definitely be a race to get in shape for the NHL season. The schedule has not been released in its entirety yet, though it was announced this afternoon that the CBA had been ratified by the NHL Board of Governors.

In my piece on the end of the lockout from this past weekend, I outlined some of the changes of the new CBA. Most of the changes centered around contract issues, including setting a

maximum contract length of eight years for re-signing with a team and seven for signing as a free agent and an escalating league minimum salary. Other changes include an alteration to the draft lottery that allows all 14 non-playoff teams to have a chance at the first overall pick and a provision on salary variance from year-to-year that will prevent frontloading or backloading of contracts.

Unfortunately, it appears that a lot of unanswered issues still exist, which will likely lead to another impasse down the road, when one or both sides can opt out of this CBA in 2021. But, for now, the NHL will begin again in 10 days.

While I was out of town for a week, the United States Under-20 World Junior Hockey Championship team made history, picking up the third gold medal in tournament history for the United States. After beating Slovakia in their final round robin game to make the quarterfinals, the U.S. team smashed the Czechs in the quarterfinals, beat the Canadians 5-1 in the semifinals, and won gold over the Swedes in the finals by a 3-1 score.

The U.S. adds this World Juniors win to their recent domination during the Under-17 and Under-18 tournaments. Many skeptics have pointed to how the Under-17 and Under-18 teams have an advantage because they play together year-round as part of the United States National Developmental Team program in Ann Arbor, Michigan. They were quieted by the Under-20 team, which includes college players and players participating in Canadian juniors. Also, they were quieted by the dominating performance over the Canadians.

In any event, the World Juniors, again, showed the progress made by the United States on an international level. With three gold medals in 10 years in one of the premier international tournaments, along with the great success at the younger levels and the 2010 silver medal showing at the Olympics, the talent level coming out of the United States is the highest it has ever been.

A brief update on the Lake Erie Monsters, who took two out of three last week, with both wins coming after regulation. The Monsters split a pair with the Charlotte Checkers, winning 2-1 in overtime on Thursday night and losing 4-0 on Friday night. On Saturday, following a late night bus trip to Hamilton, Ontario, the Monsters prevailed 3-2 in a shootout.

They currently sit eighth in the Western Conference with 39 points. It remains to be seen what will happen with the AHL, now that a lot of teams are losing their best players as they get recalled to NHL training camp. In advance of the recalls, the Monsters were assigned two players from the Central Hockey League's Denver Cutthroats and also signed some players to player try-out contracts.

The Monsters won't return home until January 24, as their five-game road trip takes them to San Antonio, Houston, Hershey, and Syracuse.