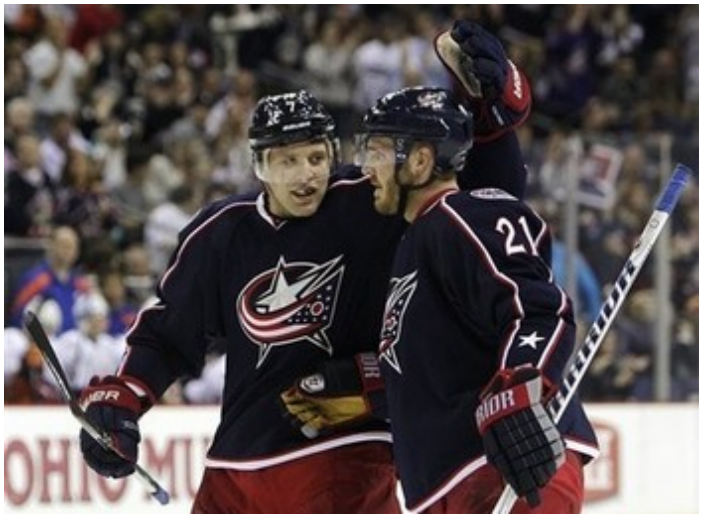

It may only be seven games into the shortened 48-game season, but we have a pretty good idea of who the Columbus Blue Jackets are and what we can expect for the rest of the season. The Jackets, a competitive, young team with a lot of heart, have lost five of their first seven games, with a goal differential of minus-9. They have looked competitive in three of those five losses, all by one goal margins. Their two wins were both one goal victories.

In terms of growing a culture of winning, John Davidson has a tough task ahead of him. However, the first step to a culture of winning is a culture of competitiveness. Last season, the Blue Jackets were minus-60 in goal differential, the worst mark in the league by eight goals and lowest mark in the Western Conference by 11. The Jackets have competed well over their first seven games and simply lack the offensive talent to turn a good effort into a good win. Even the game-winning goal against Dallas on Monday night was a fluke goal on a Vinny Prospal shot from below the goal line.

Ultimately, what we have found out about the Blue Jackets through the first two weeks of the season is that they have some pieces to build around, but they are a long way from being a contender in the ultra-competitive Western Conference. Jack Johnson has played extremely well for the Jackets so far and ranks sixth in the league in average ice time per game. He has played in all three situations, powerplay, even strength, and shorthanded, and has looked like a player with good tools and a guy the Jackets can rely on.

Cam Atkinson had a major impact before a lower body injury has left him in the press box for the last few games. Ryan Johansen looks like a much different player this season, having bulked up to handle the physical aspect, and improving his defensive zone play. Artem Anisimov has looked very good in his first seven games as a Jacket, which is important as he

was one of the key pieces in the Rick Nash deal.

The reason for the inauspicious start for the Jackets has been a lack of offense. The Jackets have managed just 13 goals in their first seven games. To make matters worse, three are from defensemen, two are from grinder Mark Letestu, and one is from Derek Dorsett. RJ Umberger, Derick Brassard, Brandon Dubinsky, Ryan Johansen, and Matt Calvert have combined to score zero goals so far. Nick Foligno and Atkinson each have one. Prospal, Letestu, and Anisimov are the only Jackets with more than one goal.

The shortened season seems to be taking at least one trend from last season – the Blue Jackets are not a good road team. Last season, the Blue Jackets were 12-29 on the road. So far this season, the Jackets are 1-3 on the road with a minus-8 goal differential. In their defense, the recent road games have put the Blue Jackets in bad spots. The back-to-back in Phoenix and Colorado was difficult because of the altitude changes and playing three games in four days. The most recent loss, a 3-2 defeat in Minnesota, the Jackets couldn't fly out of Columbus until the morning of the game because of fog in St. Paul. As a result of the unconventional itinerary on game day, the Jackets gave a poor effort.

The goaltending situation appears to be deciding itself, as Sergei Bobrovsky has played better than Steve Mason. Bobrovsky was in net for both of the team's wins and has allowed just 10 goals in four games. His .923 save percentage ranks 10th among goalies who have played at least four games. Mason, on the other hand, has allowed 11 goals in three games, with just an .880 save percentage. In those three games, the team has seemed to take on a different persona, appearing to have little trust in Mason to make the big save. Being able to rely on your goaltender is a major psychological boost. That might be hurting Mason right now more than anything. When your team has no confidence in you, you can sense that. As a former goaltender, John Davidson probably wants to take a good, long, hard look at Mason and see what he can evaluate. Can he help? It's hard to say. But, one thing he can do is move on after the season.

The Jackets will actually get a chance to catch their collective breath this week. They play six straight home games starting January 31 and ending February 11. If the Jackets want to entertain any thoughts of a playoff spot, they must play extremely well during this stretch. If nothing else, the Jackets have been a competitive team at home and the games should be entertaining to watch. They will serve as a measuring stick for the team with games against the Blues, Red Wings, Kings, Flames, Oilers, and Sharks.

An update on the Lake Erie Monsters…Andrew Agozzino and Mike Sgarbossa represented the Monsters well in Providence for the 2013 AHL All-Star Game. Agozzino had an assist and Sgarbossa didn't find the scoresheet, but both players were in the plus category in the Western Conference's 7-6 win over the Eastern Conference. Sgarbossa was rewarded for his All-Star appearance with a call-up from the Colorado Avalanche.

The Monsters won one and lost in a shootout last week, beating Toronto on Thursday night and losing to Hamilton on Saturday night. The Monsters are tied for fifth in the Western Conference, but have played three more games than the teams above and below them. With five shootout wins this season, they also trail in the tiebreakers. The Monsters have 33 games left this season. The Abbotsford Heat will be in town Thursday and Friday. The Hershey Bears will finish off the Monsters' homestand next Tuesday night.