We recruited Adam Burke to do a monthly hockey column for us here at TCF, with the potential of expanding upon it in years to come. In the piece, Adam recaps what's been going on with the Lake Erie Monsters, the Columbus Blue Jackets, and also on the Ohio college hockey scene. The Monsters have been hot as of late, and Adam urges Clevelanders to get down to The Q and check it out. Especially with the Cowboys cheerleaders coming to town ...

It's the Most Wonderful Time of the Year ...

... to be a hockey fan! It's that lovely period in sports where there is an enormous lull between the Super Bowl and March Madness. This year, however, that period is just a bit more exciting. Our own, yes our own because we steal the Buckeyes from Columbus anyway, Blue Jackets are deep in the hunt for the first time in their existence. In this installment of the best hockey column on The Cleveland Fan, I'll touch on the Jackets, the lowly Monsters, and start to preview the NCAA Division I Hockey Championships.

The next three weeks for the Columbus Blue Jackets may be the biggest period in their franchise's existence. For all National Hockey League teams, the month of February is enormously important because the trade deadline falls on February 26th at 3 p.m. Lovingly referred to as the hockey fan's Christmas, the trade deadline is a chance for general managers to be buyers or sellers. The trade deadline before the new CBA was signed was a week or two into March, leaving less teams in the hunt and making the deadline more clear cut. The 2006-2007 trade deadline set a record with 44 players changing addresses as part of 25 separate trades.

Columbus currently rests in trade deadline purgatory. Not cracking the top eight seeds, Columbus would be shut out of its first trip to the playoffs in franchise history. Light can be seen at the end of the tunnel, however. Columbus is just five points out of being in a tie for fifth place in the crowded Western Conference. With 9 games before the February 26th deadline, a lot can be sorted out. With several winnable games, including games at Phoenix, Toronto, St. Louis and Montreal and Los Angeles and Chicago at home, the Jackets could very easily become buyers under rookie GM Scott Howson.

So far, Columbus has not been quiet on the trade front. One trade sent tough guy and fan favorite Jody Shelley to San Jose for a 6th round draft pick. Shelley had seen his minutes drastically reduced thanks to the emergence of Jared Boll and San Jose gives Shelley a shot at winning the Stanley Cup. In the more recent of the trades, the Jackets gave up LW Curtis Glencross to get D Dick Tarnstrom from Edmonton. Tarnstrom, a puck moving blueliner will take some of the pressure of Ron Hainsey and give Columbus a little more offense from an offensively-changed top six featuring Adam Foote and Jan Hejda.

Columbus's problems still lie on the road where they are 9-15-2. Posting a 16-8-5 record at home, only Detroit, Nashville, New York Rangers and Colorado have more home wins (multiple teams are tied with

16). Seven of the next nine contests will see Columbus carrying the flag away from Nationwide Arena. This stretch will be critical to tell if the Jackets can use that elusive ‘P' word on deadline day.

Meanwhile, since we last left our heroes, some of the Jackets have continued to enjoy monster seasons. Most notably is goaltender **Pascal Leclaire** .
Leclaire's inexplicable snubbing from the NHL's mid-winter classic in Atlanta, Georgia, left many wondering what he had done wrong. The stats say that he has been extremely good. He still leads the league in shutouts (8), is fourth in save percentage (.925), and third in goals-against average (2.10).
Rick Nash
continues to have a great season as the Jackets' leading goal scorer, currently 12th in the league in goals (28) and is co-leader in points with 45.
Nikolai Zherdev
is buying into Ken Hitchcock's system, and seeing more playing time as a result. He has vaulted to a

tie atop of the Jackets' leaderboard with 45 points.

As a whole, Columbus's defense is really helping them into playoff contention. Five of Columbus's top six plus-minus (+/-) leaders are defensemen. **Jan Hejda** is the leader at +8, while **Kris Russell** is the team's worst at -11. (Those of you unaware what the +/- category is for, a player gets a + when he is on the ice for one of his team's even strength or shorthanded goals. Consequently, a player gets a - for one of the other team's even strength or shorthanded goals. Power play goals do not count for or against the +/- stat.)

As touched upon earlier, the Jackets have a big month ahead of them. Here's how the schedule breaks down: (all games televised on FSN Ohio, Cavs coverage holds precedent in the Cleveland/Akron market)

Feb. 7 @ PHX 9 p.m.
Feb. 8 @ SJ 10:30 p.m.

Feb. 10 LA 6 p.m.
Feb. 13 CHI 7 p.m.
Feb. 15 @ DET 7:30 p.m.
Feb. 17 @ STL 6 p.m.
Feb. 19 @ TOR 7 p.m.
Feb. 21 @ OTT 7:30 p.m.
Feb. 23 @ MTL 7 p.m.

The Lake Erie Monsters have been playing considerably better of late. They have gained at least one point in each of their last eight games, going 4-0-3-1 (W-L-OTL-SOL) in that span, bumping their record to 16-21-4-6. The team is completely hampered by injuries and parent call-ups. T.J. Hensick's been shining in Colorado, with five goals in his last three games, so the Monsters can't expect him back anytime soon. **Cody McCormick, Kyle Cumiskey, Johnny Boychuk, Cody McLeod, Tyler Weiman, Mike Wall, Wyatt Smith, Brad Richardson, David Jones** and **T.J. Hensick** have all racked up frequent flyer miles over the

past two months. Two of their top six defensemen,
Ray Macias
and
Steve Margeson
are out with concussions. Nine of the Lake Erie players have combined to play 159 games at the NHL level so far this season.

Even still, fans are going out to see the depleted team on weekends. The Monsters are averaging 7,396 fans for their Friday and Saturday dates. The team has responded by playing much better. Things are looking up for the sixth place Monsters. Fifteen of their final 33 games come against teams directly ahead of them in the standings and they have five games in hand on fourth place Syracuse. The top four teams in each division make the playoffs under the American Hockey League format. However, there is a snag in the Western Conference. Because there are 8 teams in the South Division, the top five make it if the fifth place

team has more points than the fourth place team in the North Division, then only the top three from the North Division make the second season.

The key to Lake Erie's success in recent weeks has been a more efficient power play. First year coaches Joe Sacco and Sylvain Lefebvre have fixed the problems and the Monsters have played much better because of that. **David Jones** is now third in the league with 12 power play tallies. Jones also has a 10-game point streak going.

The recent rash of injuries claimed goaltender **Tyler Weiman** while in Colorado. Jose Theodore just returned to the Avalanche, allowing **Mike Wall** to come back to Cleveland. Wall played very well against Hamilton on Wednesday surrendering goals en route to a 2-1 overtime

loss, getting very little help from his defense.

The team has played .500 hockey since it started 0-6 as an expansion franchise with kids who had never played together before. They will certainly have to play better than .500 against their remaining opponents to make the playoffs, but the team has made huge strides in its infancy. Their chief obligation is to develop players for the parent club. As mentioned above, nine Monsters have played with the Avalanche this season. Though there are discrepancies between paid attendance and actual attendance, the team is drawing well and creating a fan base.

Speaking of drawing a fan base, one of America's athletic institutions will perform on Saturday February 9. The Dallas Cowboys Cheerleaders will perform at both intermissions and be available for autographs before the game and during the third period of the tilt against the Grand Rapids Griffins. A huge

interdivision game and a bunch of smokin' hot women - what could be better at a hockey game? Use Friday's 7:30 game against Grand Rapids for pregaming with $1 hot dogs and $1 soft drinks.

The upcoming schedule for the Monsters includes five interdivisional games to round out the month: (all games can be heard on ESPN 850 WKNR)

Feb. 8 Grand Rapids 7:30 p.m. ($1 hot dog night)
Feb. 9 Grand Rapids 7:30 p.m. (Dallas Cowboys Cheerleaders Night) (game can be seen on FSN Ohio)
Feb. 14 Hershey 7 p.m. (College ID night) (game can be seen on FSN Ohio)
Feb. 15 @ Grand Rapids 7 p.m.
Feb. 16 @ Hamilton 7 p.m.
Feb. 18 @ Syracuse 7 p.m. (game can be seen

on FSN Ohio)
Feb. 22 @ San Antonio 8 p.m.
Feb. 24 @ San Antonio 7 p.m.
Feb. 27 Houston 7:30 p.m.
Feb. 29 @ Rockford 8:30 p.m.

Ice Chips: Miami of Ohio will take on scUM February 8th and 9th in Oxford at 8:05 and 7:35 p.m. respectively. The battle pits the #1 Redhawks against the #2 Wolverines. Columbus Blue Jackets owner John McConnell was hospitalized Sunday with pneumonia. He is expected to make a full recovery. The Blue Jackets announced Wednesday that they have signed F Jason Chimera to a 4-year contract extension. The deal is reportedly worth $7.5 million, making his cap hit $1.875 million.

The Division I high school hockey Baron Cup began Wednesday night at Brooklyn Recreation Center. In the first game, #4 St. Edward High School beat #5 Strongsville

High School 7-3. In the second game, top ranked University School beat #8 Hudson High School 5-0. The tournament continues on Thursday with #2 Padua Franciscan High School taking on #7 North Olmsted High School and #3 St. Ignatius High School facing off with #6 Elyria Catholic High School. The championship will be played Sunday at Brooklyn Recreation Center at 5:30.