As the Blue Jackets limp to the finish line, eight points behind the eighth-seeded three-way tie between Anaheim, Dallas, and Calgary, very little seems to be going right. The team has lost 11 of their last 13, including five games in overtime/shootout. Entering Tuesday's game against the Blue Jackets, Colorado had lost 20 of 22. The Jackets blew three separate leads to the Avs before eventually falling in a shootout.

The Blue Jackets have now lost six straight shootouts and are playing some of their worst hockey at the most crucial time. After Steve Mason's scorching February that put the team in to the playoff race, he has gone 1-5-4 in March with a 3.02 GAA. Rick Nash has three goals in 12 March games. Matt Calvert has one goal this month. After a lot of people were singing his praises last month, he has seen his ice time cut and may be starting to wear down to the nightly grind of the NHL. Before breaking out with two goals against Colorado, RJ Umberger had four points in 11 March contests.

There really is no explanation for what is going on. The Derick Brassard injury earlier in the month hurt, but to have key parts of the offense go missing is inexplicable. The team reached a new low on March 20 against New Jersey managing 13 shots for the game. The Devils have been the hottest team in the league since February, but 13 shots is pathetic, no matter who the opponent.

Scott Howson did get a vote of confidence from Team President Mike Priest last week, and deservedly so. Howson was responsible for the last three drafts, which have gone better than the drafts during the Doug MacLean era. Howson also brought in RJ Umberger, the team's heart and soul. He also orchestrated the Fedor Tyutin trade, unloading the enigma that was Nik Zherdev.

Some of Howson's moves, Mike Commodore and Kristian Huselius immediately come to mind, have not worked. He has his stamp on the team and I still like Scott Arniel as the coach. Howson deserves to see this thing through. Even with a salary cap, Columbus is not an attractive destination to free agents. However, building through the draft is the key in the NHL and the Jackets have some very good pieces to build around in their prospect pool.

One stumbling block for the team is their placement in the Western Conference. For starters, they are in one of the most difficult divisions in all of sport. Detroit, Nashville, and Chicago are perennial playoff members and Stanley Cup contenders. The West boasts a 137-82-38 record against the Eastern Conference. The Jackets would be just four points out if they were in the East, but, given that they would be playing the Eastern Conference more frequently, and they are 10-3-2 against the East this season, they would be in. It is a very tough draw, especially given that they were put there as an expansion team.

The team is left to play out the string now and look toward the draft. The only two potential opportunities to play spoiler are at Dallas on April 5 and against Buffalo on April 9. We will learn a lot about the character in that locker room from here on out. If they continue to compete, then they just need to infuse some talent. If they roll over and die, the whole room needs an overhaul.

One final local thing to add before looking around the NHL as a whole, the Greater Cleveland Sports Commission was able to secure the Tier-2 USA Under-18 Nationals Hockey tournament for March 30-April 3 at Mentor Ice Rink and Gilmour Ice Arena in Gates Mills. The tournament website can be found here . It will feature some of the best high school-aged players in the country, with teams coming from as far as Alaska, Arizona, and Alabama. Team Cleveland is made up of kids from local high schools, including St. Edward, St. Ignatius, Shaker Heights, University School, and Padua. It should be very exciting hockey to say the least.

Other news from around the NHL:

Resident arsehole Matt Cooke was suspended 10 games plus the first round of the playoffs for this blatant elbow
on the Rangers' Ryan McDonagh. Cooke is a repeat offender and his timing could not have been worse for this gem. First, it happened right after the GM Meetings last week where player

safety was the key topic. Second, he did it on the nationally-televised Sunday NBC game of the week. Cooke's cheap shot will cost him more than $219,000 in salary for the remaining 10 games. Players are not paid for the playoffs, though, if Pittsburgh wins their first round series, I wonder if his cut of the bonus money they are awarded is also stripped from him. Good for the NHL to crack down, even with the fact that McDonagh was not hurt.

A good piece on Yahoo's Puck Daddy blog from Greg Wyshynski about the Panthers need for a practice goaltender while on a road trip to New York City that gave two brothers a special opportunity. Panthers forward Marty Reasoner knew exactly who to call- his Wall Street trader brother Adam. Just one of those cool stories that pops up occasionally.

The Buffalo Sabres lost a legend this past week as Rick Martin, part of the famous French Connection line, died in a car accident after suffering an apparent heart attack. Martin, 59, played for the Sabres during the 1970s and racked up 382 goals and 695 points playing alongside Gilbert Perreault and Rene Robert.

The Montreal Canadiens will get their first shot at redemption on Zdeno Chara on Thursday night in Boston. This is the first time the two teams will meet since the horrible incident a couple weeks ago that left Canadiens' forward Max Pacioretty hospitalized with a severe concussion and fractured vertebrae. Mark Recchi fueled the fire this week by saying that he felt the Canadiens embellished Pacioretty's injuries in order to try and get Chara suspended. Puck Daddy has a transcript of Recchi's radio interview.

Finally, this week's Youtube of the Week shows that LA Kings goalie Jonathan Quick may be able to control pucks with his mind.

A minor league update on the Lake Erie Monsters:

The Monsters are back in possession of first place after winning four games in five nights from Friday-Tuesday. They took all three on the road on the weekend and won a sluggish 2-1 game over the last-place Rochester Americans on Tuesday night at home. Now, they go back out on the road this weekend to play Rochester and Toronto, both games with serious playoff

implications as they all do at this point in such a crowded division.

With top offensive threat Mark Olver playing in Colorado, it is very impressive that they have been able to play as well as they have. The team wore their road uniforms at home on Tuesday since they had won five straight in them. Camaraderie and belief are evident in that locker room and it would be great to see the franchise make their first AHL Calder Cup run.

Upcoming schedules:

Columbus: 3/24 @ PHX, 3/27 v. VAN, 3/29 v. FLA

Lake Erie: 3/25 @ Rochester, 3/26 @ Toronto