There's an amazing playoff chase going on in the National Hockey League. What is even more amazing is how many American-born players are directly affecting said playoff chase. Over the last few years, USA Hockey has had an incredible resurgence, from the NHL to lowest levels with five and six year olds stumbling and bumbling around on the rink.

Currently going on at Gilmour Ice Arena in Gates Mills, OH and at Mentor Ice Rink in Mentor, OH is the USA Hockey Under-18 Tier-II National Championships. I had the privilege of attending March 30's games and will attend on March 31 and then championship Sunday, sandwiching the days around the Indians home opener and my fiancée's birthday.

In attendance are teams from Missouri, Alaska, Alabama, Florida, Georgia, Arizona, California, Wyoming, North Carolina, and Montana. The growth of hockey in the United States is embodied in these national tournaments. Some of these players are transplants to the area. Others were born and bred there. Every state's players have a different style of play. Case in point, I watched the California Wave/Troy Sting game on March 30, featuring two drastically different geographic areas and two drastically different gameplans. The California team was fast, extremely skilled, and focused on quick transition. The Troy, MI team was slower, but played a much more physical game and wanted to play puck control hockey. California won, but not without wearing down to the resistance presented by a physical, hard-nosed team. The game was decided by the number of obstruction penalties on the Troy team and California cashing in on their powerplay chances.

Hockey players, more so than any other sport, are representative of the area they grow up. Players born and raised in blue collar environments have tremendous work ethic, with a willingness to play a physical game and battle along the boards. Players in whiter collar areas

want to play a fast paced game, similar to life in their locale- fast and ever-changing. These players would rather chip the puck and chase it down than take a hit to make a play. Neither player is wrong. Neither player is better or worse than the other. Both styles of play can be highly effective. But, it takes both styles of play to make a good national team. Canada has had that for years. The United States is finally catching up.

Hockey players are coming from everywhere in the US now. Our international teams, at every level, are perennial contenders. For a sport that is very expensive and takes a lot of organization to play, to see the growth of American hockey is phenomenal. One gentleman I spoke to at the tournament on Wednesday told me that he has spent upwards of $10,000 this season for his son to play hockey. He plays for the Tampa Bay Titans. The team is forced to fly to almost all of their away tournaments. The family was transplanted from Chicago to Tampa Bay. In Chicago, showcase tournaments and travel teams are plentiful, with a rich tradition. In Tampa, the team barely qualified for the national tournament by traveling to Atlanta on a whim to achieve enough games.

Proud parents, supporters, sponsors, and donors are doing their part and they cannot be overlooked. USA Hockey's National Development Program has an operating cost of nearly $3M per calendar year. That does not even encompass the thousands of other programs who pay their own way. What do we have to show for it? A country that is once again proud of its standing in the hockey world.

Following the dramatic 2010 Olympics, the US team winning gold and bronze in the 2010 and 2011 World Junior Championships, and the Under-18 and Under-17 teams having great showings on the international level, the lower levels of USA Hockey benefit greatly from the success up above them. As a result, so do us as hockey fans. More and more hometown players make it to the professional ranks, giving fans a rooted interest in supporting players all over the league. The game gets better. As any American knows, we are most interested in our teams when they are doing well. From our NHL players to the kids playing at smaller, local levels, they have worked hard to earn the respect and support of a country that, by and large, views hockey as a second-tier major sport.

Going to the tournament this week has reaffirmed what I have felt since the 2010 World Junior Championship team won gold in thrilling fashion over Canada in overtime. USA Hockey is going in the right direction. With the NBA and NFL looming towards lockouts, do yourself a favor. Find hockey. Embrace it. Follow the local names and track our Olympic heroes. You will not be disappointed.

Notes about the Blue Jackets:

The Blue Jackets actually managed to win a shootout this past Tuesday over the Florida Panthers. At this stage, however, they would be better off losing to improve their draft standing. The Jackets would currently pick eighth in what is reportedly the weakest draft in the last four years.

I took the trek down I-71 for last Sunday's Blue Jackets-Canucks tilt. What I saw was a team that has mailed it in. RJ Umberger is the only play consistently putting forth effort. My worst fears have been realized over the last two months. The entire locker room needs an overhaul. There are a handful of keepers, and, in the team's defense, most of their veteran leadership is hurt. At the end of the day, there is not enough talent and there is not enough heart in that locker room. Fixing both problems in one offseason is near impossible. This is a multiple year project and it needs to be done correctly.

A minor league update on the Lake Erie Monsters:

The Monsters had their eight-game winning streak snapped on Wednesday night with a clunker against Rockford. The Monsters were outplayed from the start and played rather disappointing with a chance to virtually clinch their first ever playoff berth.

Colorado 2nd round draft pick in 2010, Calvin Pickard, signed an amateur try-out agreement with the team and was assigned to Lake Erie. No word on when or how much he will play, but with the goaltending play the team has received from Jason Bacashihua and John Grahame, Pickard's spots may be few and far between.

Upcoming schedules:

Columbus: 3/31 @ WSH, 4/1 v. CHI, 4/3 v. STL, 4/5 @ DAL

Lake Erie: 4/1 v. Hamilton, 4/2 @ Toronto, 4/6 v. Toronto