With the Blue Jackets still fumbling through the regular season to the tune of 9-22-3, let's shift gears and talk about something exciting in the hockey world. That, of course, would be the World Junior Hockey Championships taking place in the province of Alberta, Canada. The World Juniors are basically an annual Olympic tournament of the best players under the age of 20 in the world.

The WJC are a chance for fans to see prospects in action and enjoy what has become an extremely popular tournament in the participating countries. For a while, the United States team was a bit of an afterthought in international play. Embarrassing Olympic performances and lack of success in international tournaments like the World Championships and World Juniors made the U.S. and its development programs somewhat of a laughing stock.

Since the official start of the World Juniors in 1977, the United States has medaled just seven times, only two of which being gold. The first gold medal was in 2004 when the U.S. team, led by goaltender Al Montoya and a roster stocked with future NHL stars including Zach Parise, James Wisniewski, Ryan Kesler, and David Booth, defeated Canada. The other gold medal was in 2010 when the U.S. again defeated Canada in a thrilling 6-5 overtime victory.

In terms of the hockey powers, Canada has won gold in 15 of 35 tournaments, medaling in 27 of 35. Second in gold medals is Russia with 13. No other country has more than two.

So, why the recent shift for the United States junior program? How has the team been able to start having never before seen success at the international level? The United States under-18 team has won three consecutive gold medals, the under-20 team has four of its seven medals over the last eight tournaments.

NHL Commissioner Gary Bettman takes a lot of flak from fans and media types for some of his decisions. His insistence on having the game of hockey spread throughout the country has helped lead the resurgence of USA Hockey. The players in this year's World Juniors tournament were born between 1992-1994. Within the 20 years since then, NHL franchises have begun in Anaheim, San Jose, Columbus, Phoenix, Denver, Dallas, Miami, Tampa Bay, Nashville, and St. Paul. Some, like Denver and St. Paul, either had teams previously or were fairly strong hockey markets to begin with.

However, this rise of hockey in other areas of the United States, along with rebirth of hockey in cities like Pittsburgh and Los Angeles thanks to Mario Lemieux and Wayne Gretzky got kids and their parents interested in the game of hockey. The Detroit Red Wings and their success during the 1990s spiked hockey interest in the metro Detroit area. Ten of the players on the 2011-12 U.S. World Junior team are from either Michigan or Pennsylvania.

The youth hockey efforts of teams in the non-traditional hockey markets of the western and southern parts of the United States have strengthened the talent crop of the country. Even if these players are a step behind kids from capitals of hockey like Minnesota and Massachusetts, talent is coming from many different areas and it ups the quality of hockey in the U.S.

One of the most interesting observations of the World Juniors is to see the philosophical differences between countries. Part of what has helped USA Hockey grow into a more competent program internationally is their shift in ideology. The United States used to pride itself on toughness and a blue collar attitude. While it embodied the majority of the country, it is a hard game to play on wider international rinks against faster, more skilled teams. Instead, the U.S. Development program began to emphasize a combination of both, similar to what Canadian hockey has been for the better part of three decades.

The United States is taking players with tremendous size and build and developing their skill and speed to make a complete hockey player. This was evident during the 2010 Olympics with big players like Bobby Ryan and Ryan Kesler, two hard-working, physical players who bring more to the table than just work ethic and hitting.

After the 1980 Miracle on Ice, when Herb Brooks challenged the old philosophy of USA Hockey with his elaborate plan to instruct his team how to play a hybrid system of Soviet and Canadian

hockey, the change should have been implemented across the board. Brooks took a team with physical college players and worked tirelessly improving their skating and passing skills. However, when the International Olympic Committee decided to allow professionals to participate beginning with the 1984 Olympics, USA Hockey was less interested in teaching players how to play. That IOC decision stunted the growth of USA Hockey, as the Olympics were really the only international tournament of consequence at that time.

The Canadians are taught a similar brand of hockey to what the U.S. currently teaches. It is a game of speed and skill coupled with toughness and hard work. The reason that the gap has closed between the two countries is that the players are being groomed to play similar styles of hockey. Looking up and down every Canadian roster in international play, they are absolutely stocked with talent. Yet, every Canada-U.S. game over the last few years has been highly competitive.

The Russians are a completely different animal. In fact, if you watch for the differences between a player who plays in a Russian Elite League or Russian Junior Elite League and a Russian player who plays junior hockey in hockey, you will see an enormous difference. The Russian school of hockey is predicated on skill and speed with very little physical play. These players tend to shy away from contact and instead prefer to use their agility and superior stickhandling skills. As seen with their international success, the style works on larger international rinks. However, few Russians achieve superstar status in the NHL and many wind up not being able to handle the physicality.

The Czechs and Slovaks preach more defensive responsibility than the Russians, but lack the talent pool to pick from and usually do not have as much speed and skill. Both countries have had strong showings in international play recently and much of that is due to their ability to develop goaltenders.

The Finns are one of the countries who have struggled recently in international play because of their laid back style of play. The Finns pride themselves on defensive play and goaltending. Part of the reason they have struggled is because they have not been able to match up with the scoring and speed of other countries. They still stay true to their defensive roots. There’s an old axiom about defensemen that you don’t want to notice them because if you notice them, it’s because they’ve done something wrong. The Finns are quietly solid because of their ability to play responsible hockey.

Sweden could be the most balanced hockey country in international play. Their style of play is very strong in all three zones and if they had the amount of players to pick from the Russia, Canada, and the U.S. has, they could be an international powerhouse. One of their issues is that their players sometimes lack the size it takes to play their style of play against a bigger, stronger opponent.

Other smaller countries like Germany, Switzerland, and Norway just lack the top end talent to compete. They usually have who play well together with good chemistry and work ethic, but just don't have the scoring punch and speed necessary to compete.

The world of hockey is fascinating. There are so many layers to a country's gameplan, talent pool, and reasons as to why hockey is flourishing or faltering. International tournaments like the World Juniors give hockey fans a chance to view the game in its simplest form. Country v. country. Ideology v. ideology. Hockey power countries have an inherent leg up with bigger groups of players to choose from, but the way each country carves out its own little niche in the hockey community is a really awesome thing to see.