There are a plethora of things to discuss pertaining to the Columbus Blue Jackets as the Blue Jackets are reportedly shopping this year's first round draft pick and the NHL GM Meetings are taking place this week in Boca Raton, FL. As the NHL playoff chase continues on its upward track to its April 7 crescendo, a lot of focus is on the future rather than the present both for the Blue Jackets and the NHL.

First, the Columbus Blue Jackets. Reports have been swirling that the Blue Jackets are exploring trade possibilities regarding their first round draft pick. Assuming that the Blue Jackets finish dead last in the standings, they have a 25% chance of outright winning the draft lottery. The draft lottery allows the team who is selected at random to move up a maximum of four spots and all 14 non-playoff teams are eligible. Teams can drop a maximum of one spot. The draft lottery is completed by using weighted percentages. Without going into major detail, using these percentages, and knowing that only the five worst teams have a chance at winning the first overall pick, the Blue Jackets have a 48.2% chance of holding on to the first overall selection. They can pick no lower than second.

The rumors first began when Marc Antoine Godin, a Montreal Canadiens beat writer for the French-Canadian paper *La Presse*, tweeted that "NHL execs from 3 different teams told me #CBJ are expected to trade their 1st round pick at upcoming draft". The reason this came from a Montreal reporter is that the Canadiens currently hold the third overall pick, so any chance to move up would be attractive to them.

The consensus first overall pick is Nail Yakupov, a Russian-born winger playing with Sarnia of the Ontario Hockey League. Yakupov is just 5'10.5" and 190 lbs and suffered a major knee injury in 2011. Then, this past week, Yakupov took this nasty hit resulting in a possible concussion. Sarnia has told the media that Yakupov will miss the team's final three regular

season games and be re-evaluated after that.

Yakupov, for all his skill and raw talent, now comes with two major medical red flags. If he does indeed have a concussion, Yakupov would be four-to-six times more likely to suffer a second concussion within the next five years, according to the National Research Center. As we've seen with Sidney Crosby (more on him later), concussions can be a very difficult thing to get past. With a low center of gravity and being below six feet tall, Yakupov's health would be a monumental risk to get past and take him with the first overall pick.

There are a handful of other reasons, outside of concerns about Yakupov, as to why the Blue Jackets could trade the pick. Most scouts and front office members agree that this year's draft is very top-five heavy and drops off after that. A top two selection like Columbus's would be worth quite a bit in trade. The Blue Jackets are fully aware of this. For every team unwilling to take a chance on Yakupov, there is likely to be a team who will and will pay a hefty price for him. The Jackets' goal would be to get proven NHL players for the draft pick.

If the Jackets do trade the pick and add proven NHL talent, it could entice Rick Nash to stay with the team. Despite the ugliness of the post-trade deadline comments by both Rick Nash and Scott Howson, the two could set their differences aside for the good of the franchise if Howson is proactive about improving the team. Nash may be willing to let bygones be bygones and stay with Columbus if he has something to work with.

Yakupov certainly would help any team he would go to, but the Blue Jackets have bigger needs than just a flashy forward. They need a goaltender. Furthermore, they may like one of the other projected top ten players and figure they could get one of them if they traded down in the draft.

There's also the Russian factor with Yakupov. The team has been burned by drafting Nikita Filatov and Nikolai Zherdev in the past. Yakupov, unlike Filatov and Zherdev, has been playing the North American game for two years, which should make him a different player than the two busts who are no longer in the NHL.

Another possibility is simply that the Blue Jackets are doing what any good organization would do – find out the value of its assets. If a rival GM is willing to overpay for the first pick in the draft, Columbus would be stupid to pass. If the right offer doesn't come along, the team can

simply keep the pick and announce it on draft day. There's nothing wrong with testing the waters and seeing what's available. On a team with plenty of holes, filling two or three is better than filling just one.

Either way, the next three months for the Columbus Blue Jackets are huge for the future of the franchise. With the arena agreement troubles fixed, the on-ice product needs to be rectified. Whether that happens with Nail Yakupov, Rick Nash, or both remains to be seen.

The General Managers' Meetings have been taking place in Boca Raton, FL throughout the week and several interesting topics have been on the agenda. As impending Collective Bargaining Agreement talks loom on the horizon this offseason, the GMs got together to look for ways to improve the game and player safety.

Some of the proposals brought up include hybrid icing, re-installing the red line (calling two-line pass violations), removing the trapezoid behind the net so goalies can play the puck, penalties for a defensive zone hand pass, and other player safety issues.

So far, no proposals have officially been brought to a vote, but plenty of discussion has taken place. The hybrid icing rule would simply require that a defenseman beat a forward back to the top of the defensive zone faceoff circle for icing to be called. The college ranks have this rule. It would eliminate ugly collisions along the boards that have resulted in serious, career-threatening leg and head injuries. The main concern with this rule is that it is subjective and will occasionally put an icing decision to the linesman's discretion.

Along the lines of protecting defensemen with hybrid icing, the possible removal of the trapezoid behind the net is being discussed. The trapezoid limits the area behind the net in which a goaltender can touch the puck. Because goaltenders cannot be hit and players are more cognizant of leaving goalies alone, allowing them to handle the puck should limit the number of hits that the defensemen take by playing the puck behind the net.

The re-installation of the red line has been a hot topic to bottle up the game and limit the number of violent collisions based on the speed of the players involved. The NHL removed the red line as part of the post-lockout changes to the game to try and make things more entertaining for the fans. Removing the red line got rid of the two-line pass violation, where any pass over any two of the goal line, blue lines, and red line was illegal.

As Bob McKenzie of TSN explained on Twitter today, the tentative solution to this problem could be tested in the American Hockey League first. An imaginary line running from board-to-board at the top of the defensive zone faceoff circles called the “ringette line” would be enforced where any two-line pass completed behind said line would be whistled dead. The AHL would have to rule on this proposal and it would have to pass NHL inspection before being added to the league.

Speaking of player safety, Sidney Crosby will make his return to the ice on Thursday night against the New York Rangers. Crosby, out since January 2011 with concussion-related symptoms, has been one of the more vocal supporters of stingier rules regarding head contact and protecting players.

Crosby’s return to the ice comes with a very high degree of risk as another concussion could cut short the career of one of the league’s best players.

I have failed to mention the Lake Erie Monsters pretty much all season long and I’d be remiss if I did not update their playoff chase.

The AHL shifted to the NHL format for playoff standings and seeding this year, changing from the divisional format it used last year. As of Tuesday, the Monsters were in a tie for the eighth and final playoff spot in the Western Conference with Abbotsford, one point ahead of ninth-place Rochester and two points ahead of tenth-place Houston with 13 games left to play.

The AHL reduced its number of games to 76 for this season.

Fourth place through tenth place in the AHL's Western Conference standings are separated by just three points. The Monsters currently own the first tiebreaker over every team below them and also Abbotsford, the team in seventh.