

Americans' hockey roster taking shape

By SCOTT MANSCH
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Matt Frank wants to win hockey games the right way. And that means with the right kids.

"I've been going to a ton of showcases across the country, introducing myself and identifying the kind of players that fit the mold of what we want here in Great Falls," said the head coach/general manager of the new Great Falls Americans Junior A hockey club.

And what would that mold be?

"We want kids with good grades, good quality kids, and good hockey players who will come in and represent the Americans well in this community."

Though it might only be the

middle of summer, Frank and his bosses – team owner Jim Keough and Americans' marketing director Quin Keough – have ice on the mind these days. Frank has signed six players and expects to have at least 25 players when the Americans open training camp in late August.

"The six who have signed tenders are all pretty good kids who are on the verge of signing with Tier II teams," said Frank. "But they need another year of experience."

The Americans, not to be confused with the high school-aged team of the same name, will compete in the Tier III America West Hockey League. That was the case nearly a decade ago when the

Great Falls franchise ceased operations.

And now it's back.

Our slogan is "The Boys are Back," said Keough. "It's been eight years for the Americans."

Frank, a 28-year-old Billings native who for the last few years has been coaching a Junior A team in Atlanta, has moved to Great Falls to assemble and run the squad.

"It's very stressful. A little nerve-wracking," he said of his new role as coach/GM. "We want to make a name for ourselves and continue the Americans' rich tradition of winning hockey and excellence."

The game plan?

"We want to create a tough,

gritty environment," said Frank. "An environment where you know you're always in for a tough time when you play against Great Falls."

To do that, he said, he's recruiting defensive-minded athletes.

"There will definitely be offensive-minded players who need to score goals for us," he said. "But my mentality is that everyone can play defense. I'm very disciplined. And that's the kind of players I want."

Terry Metro, a Michigan native who has vast experience in Tier III hockey, will be Frank's assistant coach.

"He's sharp," Frank said. "He's moved on so many kids to college hockey and pro

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Frank



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Americans: Frank is head coach/general manager

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hockey. I think he'll be a huge asset for our organization."

Besides the Americans, the AWWHL will include the Billings Bulls, Bozeman Ice-dogs, Helena Bighorns, Missoula Maulers and Gillette (Wyo.) Wild. Billings, Bozeman, Helena and Missoula all played in the NORPAC last year, and Helena won the national championship in Tier III of Junior Hockey.

Helena and Missoula figure to be two of the top teams in the league.

"We're aiming to mold our organization around the success they've had," Frank said. "We're trying to bring younger kids in and then move them on to the next level the following year. We're a developmental league."

"Even the best players are playing a year of Junior hockey," he added. "Colleges want more developed, older kids. "It's such a physically demanding sport, a later-developing sport. And there's a lot of mental toughness and aptitude that goes into it."

Play in the AWWHL, which features a 44-game schedule, is slated to commence in October. The Americans will play 24 home games at the Great Falls IcePlex, mainly on Friday and Saturday nights.

"We hope we're going to be competitive," said Jim Keough. "We know it will be a fun, family atmosphere at the games."

The Keoughs have been gratified by the reception the team has received. Though there's been no formal advertising, word of mouth has

worked wonders. They said more than 200 season tickets have been sold and the team's 88-page program is a sellout.

"It's been amazing," Quin said.

"We've been overwhelmed by the response," Jim added. "It's been tremendous how the community of Great Falls and local businesses have stepped up and responded to us."

Among Frank's first signees are Great Falls players Dylan Anderson and Brady Christiaens. Alex Bruess of International Falls, Minn., Randy Patzner of Denver, and Donovan Mattfeldt of Phoenix has also tended "tenders" binding them to the Americans.

Frank said more signings will be forthcoming. Among those who have committed to the team, he said, are Sawyer Jacobson of Red Lodge and

Jake Mattfeldt of Glasgow.

The Americans, said the head coach, will soon become familiar to Great Falls fans.

"We will be very ingrained into the community," said Frank. "They're coming here to fit into the community and be part of the community, and give back."

The Americans have new offices in the old Johnson Motel building at 417 Central Ave. Team officials are currently looking for housing opportunities for the players. The athletes pay \$5,500 in order to be on the team and will also be charged \$300 per month to rent living quarters from hockey-minded families.

"It's an investment," said Jim Keough. "An investment in the future of these hockey players."

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