

Frank picked to guide expansion Americans

By GEORGE GEISE
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The new Great Falls Americans team in the Northern Pacific Hockey League has hired Matt Frank as its first head coach and general manager.

Owner Jim Keough, who purchased the Nor Pac expansion franchise last year, said Frank will wear both hats when he starts work here in April. Keough said Frank has been signed to a two-year contract to guide the Junior A Tier III club.



Frank

"Being an expansion team like we are, we're going to need a good coach and recruiter," said Keough.

"Matt has experience in junior hockey in the Atlanta area and he's made a lot of contacts. He'll be in charge of all trades and recruiting."

Frank, 27, grew up in Billings and is a 2002 graduate of Billings Skyview. He played three seasons with the Bozeman Icedogs Junior A club, then played four years of college hockey at Ferris State in Michigan. He currently works as a coach for the Atlanta Knights Junior Hockey Association, which operates Junior A and Junior B teams in Georgia.

"This is a good opportunity for me to become a head coach at a higher level," Frank said Tuesday in a phone interview. "It's a great area and I'll be closer to home."

Frank interviewed with Keough in Great Falls last month and inspected the IcePlex, the facility on Gore Hill that serves as the only rink in the Electric City.

"I came up a couple days after Christmas and met with Jim, and looked at the IcePlex," said Frank. "It's a nice building considering it was put together by a bunch of volunteers. It has tons of potential, that's for sure."

The Americans currently have two players signed to the 2011-12 roster, local high school stars Dylan Anderson and Brady

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Christiaens. Frank expects to sign several athletes from the Knights' teams in Georgia.

"I've got some kids on my team and the upper-division team here who I would like to bring up there," said Frank. "These are kids I've coached one or two years and know what to expect from me. I think experience is important when you're building an expansion team."

Frank said the national tournament for his Atlanta-based Junior squad is March 25-29 and he plans to be on the job in Great Falls by April 15.

Frank said he will conduct at least one tryout camp in Great Falls in August.

The Americans can have 25 players on the roster and only two of them can be foreign-born athletes.

Frank remembers playing against the last Electric City Junior hockey team called the Americans, back when Rikard Gronborg coached the club in the early part of the decade. Those teams played at Four Seasons Arena, the county-owned facility that got rid of ice several years ago.

"I think I played up there the year after (Patrick) Dwyer left," said Frank, referring to the current Carolina Hurricanes' forward who played youth and Junior A hockey in Great Falls.

Keough, who worked many years as a minor-league baseball executive here, said "the ball is really rolling now" in his quest to bring high-quality hockey back to Great Falls, which has a long history of supporting the sport.

"We're excited to have a talented young man developing players for the next level of hockey," said Keough.

The Americans will compete next season in the America West Division of NorPac along with the Billings Bulls, Bozeman Icedogs, Butte Roughriders, Helena Bighorns, Missoula Maulers and Yellowstone Quake of Wyoming. An expansion team from the Flathead Valley also is joining the league.

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