



The Great Falls Americans, a Junior A Tier III hockey club, skates during a recent workout at the IcePlex. The squad opens the season Friday night and Saturday night with home games at the facility atop Gore Hill. TRIBUNE PHOTO: IRON SANDERS

Hockey's return is icing on cake

Junior A Americans return to Great Falls ice arena this weekend

By JESSE GELEYNSE
Tribune Sports Writer

Jim Keough admits that his first love is baseball. That passion served him well during his 13 years as the general manager of the Great Falls Voyagers, White Sox and Dodgers. But come Friday's home opener against the Bozeman IceDogs, the owner of the Great Falls Americans will make his first foray into the junior hockey world as the sport returns to the Electric City for the first time in eight years. "Everything is timing and the timing, I think, was very good," said Keough, who purchased the Tier III Junior A franchise in 2010. "Two years ago, you couldn't have brought a team. There wasn't the facility. Now we have new locker rooms, showers and the facility is going to be a nice facility for this region."

Hockey has a long history in Great Falls, dating back to 1933. The previous incarnation of the Americans played in Great Falls at the Four Seasons Arena from 1992 until departing for North Dakota in 2003. The ownership group and the county, which runs Four Seasons Arena, were unable to come to terms on an adequate contract. But the opening of the Great Falls IcePlex on Gore Hill several years ago provided an opportunity and Keough took advantage. "Now we have a great building and Great Falls is ready," he said. "We just see the potential for hockey. Hockey is going to be a very popular sport." Once Keough purchased the franchise, there was the question of what to call it. But in his mind, there was no question. "They've been around for a long time and that's why we kept the logo and name,"



he said. "It's a great name." The name "Baldy" was suggested for the Americans' eagle mascot by a local kindergartner. Keough brought his son, Quin, back to Great Falls from Seattle to serve as marketing director and the younger Keough hit the ground running in securing promotions. At the home opener, the first 500 fans will receive a hockey puck with the Americans' home schedule printed on it, courtesy of the MSU College of Technology. Every Friday is a McDonald's "We win, you win" promotion, meaning if the Americans win, all ticket-holders will receive a free Big Mac. Quin is also planning Military Night, Bank Night and a canned food drive, among other promotions. "We're just going to try to take it entertaining for anyone," he said. "Even if you don't really like hockey that much, it's still something fun that will be fun to come too, especially for a family." The Keoughs are also working with head coach/general manager Matt Frank to include a community service aspect for the team's players, who are between 16 and 20 years of age. They plan to introduce a reading program, where players will go to local elementary schools and help students. "We want them to be role models in this town, so

we're just setting a good example and giving back to the community that supports them," said the 28-year-old Frank, who is a Billings native and former Bozeman IceDogs and Ferris State University hockey player. "The Keoughs have been overwhelmed with the support for the new team. Advertising is sold out in the arena and in the game program, and season ticket sales are approaching 300. Jim said it has been generated almost exclusively by word of mouth. The Americans play host to defending Tier III Junior A national champion Helena on Saturday. Also in the league are the Billings Bulls, the Missoula Maulers and the Gillette (Wyo.) Wild. "It's getting back to giving Great Falls something to do on Friday and Saturday night," Jim said. "It's going to be fun for Great Falls."



Clipped By:

kevymt

Sun, Jan 2, 2022