

Junior hockey to return to Great Falls in 2011

By **GEORGE GEISE**
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After an absence of almost a decade, junior hockey will be returning to Great Falls.

Jim Keough, a local businessman with vast experience in operating a minor-league baseball team, announced Thursday that he has purchased a Northern Pacific Hockey league (NORPAC) franchise and will put a team on the ice in the 2011-2012 season.

"Of course, it will be called Americans," said Keough, who resigned this spring after 13 years as general manager of the Great Falls Baseball Club, Inc., which runs the Voyagers of the Pioneer League.

"My first love has always been baseball, but this town needs good entertainment during the winter and this will be good for Great Falls," said Keough, who will operate the team through his family-owned business, Whitehorse LLC. He said his

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son, Quin, may join the business next year.

The NORPAC currently is a 12-team league but will expand to 14 teams in 2011-12 with the addition of teams in Great Falls and Whitefish. The will join the America West Division, that also includes the Billings Bulls, Bozeman Ice-dogs, Butte Roughriders, Helena

Bighorns, Missoula Maulers and Yellowstone (Wyo.) Quake.

The Pacific Division includes West Coast teams such as the Eugene Generals, Puget Sound Tomahawks, River City Jaguars, Rogue Valley Wranglers, Seattle Totems and Tri-City Titans.

Teams play a 48-game league schedule but don't cross over to face foes from the other division until the playoffs. The league begins play in late September and finishes its regular season in February, followed by playoffs in March.

The Americans will play their home games at the Great Falls IcePlex on Gore Hill, which should be remodeled to increase seating capacity to about 1,500.

NORPAC is a Tier III Junior B league.

Local hockey buff Jeff Cunniff, who previously operated a Junior B club here, said the arrival of the new team is good news for ice fans.

"Great Falls has had a team called the Americans since 1954 and this is a good hockey town," said Cunniff, who has been advising Keough on hockey matters but won't work for the club.

"Jim is a quality local who knows sports and marketing and it's good to have local ownership. It will be good to have talented young hockey players back in the community."

Players in the league are 16 to 20 years old and pay a substantial fee to play. They will live in private homes — as do most of the minor-league baseball players — and will pay their own housing costs.

Keough said the goal of the young athletes is to earn scholarships to land them spots in college programs.

Great Falls has been without junior hockey since the last Great Falls Ameri-

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cans disbanded in the spring of 2003, and were sold to a South Dakota group. At the time, the Americans competed in the America West Hockey League, which was a Junior A conference. Great Falls had a junior team for nine straight years before the team was sold. One reason for disbanding the club was a problem with ice time. The team played its games at the county-owned Four Seasons Arena, but commissioners took the ice out later that year.

The IcePlex was built with private funds and opened about two years ago. Keough said he expected that youth hockey and ice skating programs here will benefit from having a junior team serving as primary tenant of the building.

Keough said he expects to have one or two NORPAC games played this winter at the IcePlex, so fans can see what kind of hockey is played in the league.

"We've talked to Missoula and Helena about playing games up there," said Keough, whose main job now is to hire a head coach.

"In baseball, the major league clubs sent me players. Now, we've got to go out and find 25 or 30 players," said Keough. "The coach will be attending showcase tournaments this winter and recruiting players."

Keough said as many as six or seven athletes likely will attend high school here while they are playing. Most games are played on Friday and Saturday nights.

"The quality schools we have here in Great Falls will be a big plus for us," said Keough. "Parents in Las Vegas or New Jersey will want to know their kids are going to get a quality education while they're playing hockey."

Mark D'Agostino of Bozeman is commissioner of the NORPAC. Franchises in Missoula and Helena are among the most successful in the league.

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