

Optimistic Americans open season

By Scott Mansch
Tribune Sports Editor

The Great Falls Americans Junior A hockey team this season has a new vibe.

And a new look.

"We've got new uniforms," said team owner Jim Keough. "They're the old style. We think they're the sharpest in the league."

Said new head coach Jeff Heibel: "Vintage."

The Americans hope to measure up to the new uniforms with improved play on the ice. The America West Hockey League season begins for the team Friday night at the Great Falls IcePlex, with the Americans slated to meet the Bozeman IceDogs. The Great Falls home is also home to meet the Billings Bulls on Saturday night.

The puck drops at 7:30 both nights at the IcePlex.

"We're going to have a competitive team," said Ke-

ough. "We're older this year."

The Americans returned to the Tier III Junior A hockey world last season and won only one of 48 games. Two different coaches worked for Keough, without distinction.

Now the longtime Great Falls businessman believes he's got the right man in Heibel, a native of North St. Paul, Minn., with several years of Junior A coaching experience to his credit. Heibel has recruited a new roster, save for a few hold-overs. He said he was looking for both tangible and intangible qualities from the players.

"The chemistry," Heibel said. "It wasn't so much about recruiting raw talent. It was more about good character and representing the community well. I think we've got that with this team."

Heibel believes his

squad has what it takes to be competitive throughout the AWWHL's six-month schedule.

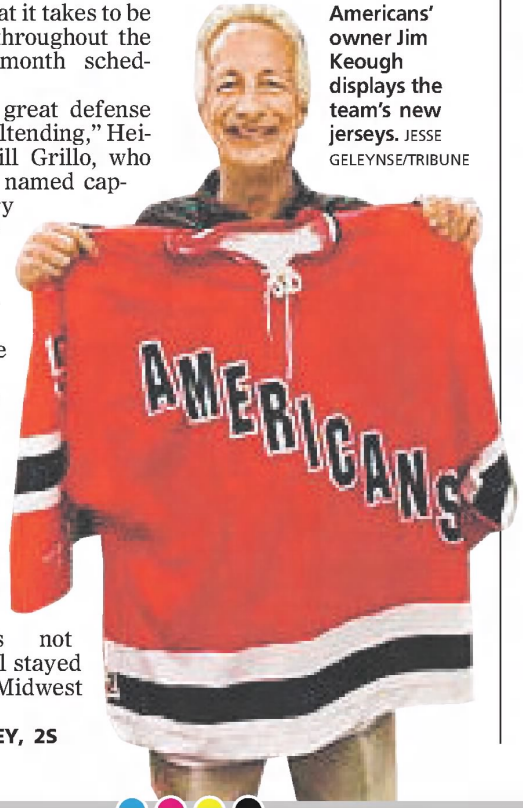
"We have great defense and great goaltending," Heibel said. "Bill Grillo, who was recently named captain, is a very good defenseman."

Grillo is from Hermantown, Minn. The Americans have another player from the hockey hotbed that is Minnesota in goaltender Evan Hauser from St. Paul.

But that's not to say Heibel stayed in the Upper Midwest

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Americans' owner Jim Keough displays the team's new jerseys. JESSE GELEYNSE/TRIBUNE



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when recruiting.

"Danny Kukikov (who is from Russia) played for me last year in Cheyenne and is arguably one of the best forwards in the league," said HeimeL. "Jakub Cmolik, from the Czech Republic, is also a very good player.

"They're on the same line. Luke Lomax (of Phoenix) is their center, a very strong player. So that's our first line right now."

Among other players expected to play key roles for HeimeL is defenseman Jake Bystrak, from Buffalo, N.Y., and forward Nathan Bastian of Batavia, Ill.

There is a Great Falls connection on the team as well. Matt Douglas, Dylan Garton and Craig Buford are all high school graduates on the roster. Jordan Jernigan, who is a senior at Great Falls and currently starring on the football team, is also expected to play for the Americans this winter.

"The rest of the players fill into roles very good," said HeimeL. "They work hard, block shots and sacrifice. They're just good kids ... Some of the things that you can't always teach kids, like having a great work ethic, these kids have it."

After a 1-47 season, of course, it's not realistic to talk playoffs. But HeimeL, who has had successful stints as head coach at Tier III teams in Cheyenne, Wyo., and Phoenix, is nothing if not optimistic.

"If you're looking what it's going to take to compete for a playoff spot and a champion-

ship down the road, it's our depth offensively," said HeimeL. "I feel like we've got a great first line ... I also feel like we have all the players we need for a complete second line.

"We might have to be some additions down the road ... If you look at a game plan, you've got good goaltending and good defense. So maybe at first we're playing a defensive style and contributing offensively when you can and winning games 2-1 or 3-2."

The Americans will play mostly on Friday and Saturday nights. Keough said the community was supportive last year, despite all the losing, and that he expects the IcePlex to be a hopping place this winter. HeimeL believes it will happen, because he thinks his club can be a contender in the AWHL.

"I absolutely think we can," HeimeL said. "We have a long ways to go and there's so many things that happen during the season. It's so hard to speak this early to that. But to have a good core group of kids, character and attitude-wise, I feel like we have some of the ingredients to potentially be there in the end."

Keough said he has not raised ticket prices, which will remain at \$8 for adults and \$5 for kids and military personnel.

"The franchise has been around a lot longer than a lot of these guys realize," HeimeL said. "The support is unbelievable here, and to hear that last year there was still support despite (just one victory), that's a true testament to the town and the fans. That it's not a throw-you-under-the-bus kind of fan base. That's very encouraging."

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