

# Keough optimistic about future of Americans hockey team

*Editor's note: Jim Keough was a longtime businessman in Great Falls before serving as general manager of the Great Falls Dodgers/White Sox/Voyagers for 13 seasons. Keough retired from the Voyagers prior to the 2011 season, but is back in the Electric City sports scene as the owner of the expansion Great Falls Americans, a Tier III junior A hockey program that plays at the IcePlex on Gore Hill. The Americans have struggled to a 1-40 record this season, but attendance and optimism are still high at the IcePlex. We caught up with*

*Keough, who was a member of the last Great Falls Electric team to win a state American Legion title in 1973 and pitched one season in the Pittsburgh Pirates organization, for our Sunday Conversation.*

**Sports Writer Jesse Geleynse**

**Question:** You have said before that Great Falls is a great hockey town. Were you aware of how big of a hockey town it was?

**Answer:** I really wasn't, I guess to this degree. I knew there were a lot of big hockey



fans. Jeff Cunniff is Mr. Hockey in Great Falls and for years he kept telling me to bring the Americans back. The Four Seasons (Arena), didn't work out for whatever reason. But this new IcePlex is about the right size and it has great support with the board members. The little

kids, almost 100 kids are learning to skate. That's exciting for Great Falls. Some of those kids, someday, will be hockey players and maybe Junior A hockey players.

**Question:** How long had Cunniff been on you to bring back the Americans and what made you finally decide to do it?

**Answer:** It was probably about two or three years ago and the timing wasn't right because the rink wasn't ready. So basically, once everything fell in, I knew I was going to retire from baseball, so I think at that time, everything kind of fell into place. But I think they've been talking about this for four or five years, trying to get everything in line up there.

**Question:** The record has been less than stellar. How have you guys been able to stay positive?

**Answer:** I think it's a hum-

bling year, to say the least. But I look at the growth of some of the kids who have been here since the beginning, how much they've improved. I look at the loyalty of the fans - that keeps us going... To have that many people come to a team that's in last place, they're really in it for the entertainment. They're in it for the betterment of Great Falls and that's having a Junior A hockey team in Great Falls, Montana.

**Question:** So the optimism for you and (son) Quin (the

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# Conversation: Life in the show was a great opportunity

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marketing director) is still high?

**Answer:** Oh absolutely. We're geared up, we're going to have some new logos next year, we're starting to recruit, essentially next week... We're really getting some qualified kids to come to Great Falls. We're the youngest team and we have been all year. Next year, if you take the core back and build on that, it's going to be fine. But this year has just been like any expansion team.

**Question:** Tell me about the sports bar that is coming soon above the concession stand.

**Answer:** They actually have the concrete donated and that's kind of our No. 1 priority, to get that done and kind of have a sports bar with TVs, where non-hockey people can go up there and be entertained. It's just like going to a baseball game. You don't watch the baseball game, you just go there (for) entertainment. I think one thing about baseball and hockey in Great Falls, is they complement each other because they're opposite times of the year. And people are looking for something to do in Great Falls.

**Question:** How much have you learned about hockey this year?

**Answer:** I've learned a lot. To be honest with you, I didn't follow hockey before this year. I've had a lot of education on hockey. It's a great sport. It's a very active, fast-paced sport and I'm used to a slow-paced baseball game. Baseball has action, but I've actually really learned a lot. I have more to learn, but it's been a learning curve. That's about as honest as I can be.

**Question:** What is different about the crowds at the Ice-Plex as opposed to at Centene Stadium?

**Answer:** It's a younger crowd. Younger people like hockey and that's why we're trying to cater to young couples and young families. It's not for retired people because it's too cold. Baseball is more of a hot, summer, retired activity.

**Question:** My grandma watches every Mariners game.

**Answer:** Really? I feel bad for her. (Laughs). I love the Mariners too. But I guess I can feel for the Mariners not winning a lot of games.

**Question:** Let's talk about the 1973 Legion team.

**Answer:** It was the last state championship for the Great Falls Electrics. I was fortunate to be on that team and actually four of us were drafted. I was drafted in the eighth round in 1975. I was just fortunate to be on that team. There were guys a lot better than me, obviously, but what a team.

**Question:** How many years were you in the Pirates organization?

**Answer:** Just that one year. I wasn't that good. I thought I was, but I went down there, and I saw free agents. The Pirates at that time were really built around a lot of Dominican kids. Roberto Clemente had just died and half our team was Dominican and we had some pretty talented players. I thought I was

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**JIM KEOUGH**

Owner of the Great Falls Americans hockey team

good, but these other guys were way above me. I was just really fortunate and blessed to have an opportunity to play professional baseball.

**Question:** How did you come to be the GM of Great Falls?

**Answer:** In 1997, the baseball club came to me and said, "We just fired the GM, do you want to be the GM?" And it just floored me. I said I would think about it, but Quin was playing Legion at the time and it was his last year of Legion. I came home, talked to my wife and family and decided I couldn't really do that because I'd miss all of his games. ... I turned them down and I think they were

shocked. They'd only had three GMs. So they hired somebody else and a year later, they fired that guy and

the following year they came to me and I said "Yeah, sure. I didn't even think about it. Quin was in college. The weirdest way to get a GM job is the way they recruited me and for 13 years, I was the GM."

**Question:** Is there anything else you would like to tell the Electric City?

**Answer:** I think the main thing to emphasize is the great sponsors... What this

does is show support for the Great Falls team. Sponsors and all the dashboards are sold out. There are waiting lists for dashboards now. Go to other rinks at this level and there might be six or seven.


Good for the sponsors and good for the people of Great Falls to say, "You know what? I want hockey in Great Falls. I want to be involved with it." That's an A+ for Great Falls.

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