



JESSICA GALLAGHER PHOTOS

The Quad City Blues hockey team goes through drills during practice at The River's Edge in Davenport last week.

## 'ONLY SHOW IN TOWN'

Q-C Blues still playing despite coronavirus

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For the first time in nearly a quarter-century, there is no professional hockey happening this winter in the Quad-Cities.

High school hockey, however, is in full swing.

Under the direction of first-year head coach Dillon Fournier, the Quad-City Blues of the Midwest High School Hockey League (MHSHL) are in the midst of their 20th season while cases of the coronavirus continue to climb.

"It's exciting (we're playing)," Blues focus representative Zach Orwig said. "That's cool to get the community engaged and let them see there is a high school level of hockey in the area."



Dylan Cutler, 11, of Davenport waits in line to run through a drill with his teammates during the Quad-City Blues hockey team practice at The River's Edge in Davenport last week.

Honestly, engage some other kind of the only show in town."

"It's actually awesome to be

Mask wearing, social distancing and washing hands are the most common practices.

So far, the virus has not had a direct impact on the Blues.

"We're trying to stay uniformed with county and local authorities," Orwig said. "It is unique because there are kids from so many schools, but the staff has done a great job. We try to get that side, play hockey and enjoy we get to be on the ice."

Nine of the 31 players on the varsity roster are from Illinois. Even with greater coronavirus concerns in that state, all of the Illinois high school athletes are eligible to play even with the team practicing and playing games at The River's Edge in Davenport, coupled with traveling throughout the Midwest.

"Our league is not affiliated

to prevent the spread of COVID-19.

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## Blues

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with the Illinois High School Association," Orwig said. "We pull from communities on both sides of the river. The kids love to come to town and play."

Fournier, the eighth head coach in program history, had to move time zones during the middle months of the pandemic. The 26-year-old moved from South Carolina to the Quad-Cities in June once he accepted the job to coach the Blues. Fournier's wife has family that live in Eldridge, which made the move a little less hectic.

"She got to be closer to family, I got to be back on the ice," Fournier said.

It wasn't that long ago that Fournier was considered a rising star and destined for the National Hockey League.

Raised in Montreal, the sport of hockey was naturally brought to him as a child. He left home at the age of 16 to pursue his dreams of playing professionally.

"At the time, I was chasing my dreams of playing in the NHL and I would've done anything to make it there," Fournier said. "I didn't think twice about it."

He was the top pick in the Quebec Major Junior Hockey League (QMJHL) draft for the now-folded Lewiston Maineiacs. He played in 60 games and had 14 total points in the regular season.

Once the Maineiacs shut down, Fournier was again the top pick in the dispersal draft, this time chosen by the Rouyn-Noranda Huskies, where he played three full seasons.

first.

"I always wanted to stay on the ice and stay involved," he said. "I was excited about being able to implement my own practices and build the program kind of from the ground up."

Orwig saw someone who was passionate about the sport of hockey during the interview process. It made for an easy decision.

"Just has a really great attitude, he was really positive when we talked to him," Orwig said. "Tons of enthusiasm to work with younger kids, which is really important."

While Fournier is young as a coach, his staff isn't.

Jake Toporowski, one of the assistant coaches for the Quad City Storm, is an assistant coach under Fournier. The latter felt it was important to keep the former involved with his connections in the area.

"I reached out to Jake as soon as I got into town and we started talking right away," Fournier said. "Trying to help me get familiar with the kids, what we need to work on. He's been a tremendous help."

Joe Dobbelaire, who grew up on Sherburne, is a former Blues player and spent his college days playing for Robert Morris University, an ACHA Division III program in Peoria, Ill.

All three coaches are under the age of 30.

"That really gives us an opportunity as an organization to grow all levels of hockey," Orwig said. "Just to create really special things. That goes for boys and girls' hockey and all across the board."

While Fournier understands his team is young with

His best season was in 2013-14, scoring 13 goals and adding in 19 assists. The 13 goals was his career high.

One year prior, Fournier was selected in the second round (48th overall) by the Chicago Blackhawks in the NHL Entry Draft.

Once he finished his time in Quebec, Fournier was sent to the Rockford IceHogs in the American Hockey League (AHL). His first season for Rockford, he played in 21 games.

The following year, the defenseman was brought down one level to the ECHL and suited up in 34 games for the Indy Fuel, logging two goals and five assists.

Over the final three years of his playing days, Fournier was in 13 games. A nagging shoulder injury forced the former top prospect to retire.

He had three surgeries on his shoulder in the span of four years, the first at the age of 17 and the final procedure when he was 21.

"I was never able to stay healthy," Fournier said. "It wasn't easy. I learned a lot and I came about stronger on the other end. There was a lot of highs and lows, it kind of forced me to grow up real quick."

Coaching was something Fournier always wanted to do. He was a private instructor in Montreal who focused on stick handling and other skills before taking the reins of the Blues.

Having his own program and developing players always piqued Fournier's in-

terest in coaching. "I love the idea of helping hockey grow in the Quad-Cities," Fournier said. "We'd like to get the development process past up to its level that kids can stay at home. Maybe try to model our high school programs to the programs out in the states a little more north (of Iowa) that have managed to hold their players."

The Blues have started the year 0-4.

Aware of the possibility of growing pains doesn't faze Fournier. He's not looking at this job as a stepping stone to another job.

For now, his focus is the Quad-City Blues and trying to compete for a state championship in the next handful of years.

"I want the kids to be more optimistic," Fournier said. "They've bought in to what we try to emphasize in practice and they've bought in to playing together. It's a lot more fun."

"I'm focused on these kids, this team, this city and what we have to offer. I'd really love to see this program take off like I know it can."