

PREP HOCKEY

COVID-19 ended giant opportunity

By Mike Chambers
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The coronavirus pandemic put a screeching halt to a glorious opportunity for Colorado high school hockey this spring.

But organizers of 2020 Team Colorado remain proud of the relatively young squad they built and excited to make their CCM National Invitation Tournament debut next year.

Last fall, Colorado prep leaders, led by Valor Christian coach George Gwozdecky, accepted an invitation to replace Massachusetts at the prestigious CCM NIT in Plymouth, Minn. The 2020 tournament was to include Team Colorado and seven teams from four hockey-rich states: Minnesota, Michigan, Wisconsin and North Dakota.

The “A” group featured Minnesota Seniors, North Dakota, Wisconsin High-Performance 18-under and Michigan High-Performance 18-under. Colorado was in the “B” group with Wisconsin Seniors, Michigan Seniors and Minnesota HP 18U. Three-game group play was to begin April 30, with the cross-bracketed playoffs set to start May 3.

In previous years, Team Colorado would travel to St. Louis and play at America’s Showcase, which is considered the junior varsity compared to the CCM NIT in Plymouth. The CCM NIT is scouted annually by junior, college and NHL teams.

“(Colorado) high school hockey has gotten so much better just in the short time I’ve watched it. There are more and more kids who recognize high school hockey as an opportunity to continue to develop,” said Gwozdecky, the former University of Denver coach who finished his fourth sea-



Fort Collins goalie Sam Simon, blocking a shot by Valor Christian’s Blake Rollison during the state championship game last month, is a member of 2020 Team Colorado. *Andy Cross, Denver Post file*

son at Valor with his first state championship in March. “It’s not only recognized by the schools but the schools being proud of their hockey program. I’m really proud of not only our current kids but the kids who helped build it and had the faith a few years ago to play for their schools.”

Colorado club hockey has traditionally been the only path to develop players for the next level, which in this sport is 20-under juniors, then college or pro. But an increasing number of Colorado midget players (ages 15-18) are ditching their high-priced triple-A club teams to play for their schools — although triple-A continues to be the most successful

route to juniors.

Team Colorado’s 20-man roster features just 10 seniors, with six juniors and four sophomores. Gwozdecky said only one player declined acceptance to the team, and that was because of a family wedding.

Team Colorado had a three-day evaluation camp in November and the seven-member advisory staff evaluated players through the Colorado Prep Hockey League (fall) and CHSAA (winter) seasons.

“Any one of those kids who made this team, I’m very proud of them because there were a lot of players to choose from and each one of these kids brought some-

thing special to this team,” said Cherry Creek coach Jeff Mielnicki, one of Gwozdecky’s all-star assistants. “Under George’s leadership, I was just proud to be part of the staff.”

Mielnicki added: “Colorado is committed to high school hockey, there’s no doubt. We’re progressing very well. ... That’s going to continue to grow and our commitment is to get our players the most exposure — and this is the one tournament that provides that.”

“I expect it to be even more competitive next year, because kids are going to recognize that this could perhaps change their career trajectory,” Gwozdecky

2020 Team Colorado

Players in alphabetical order: Robbie Dembeck, F, Regis Jesuit, So. Nolan Devine, F, Fort Collins, Jr. Ty Doan, D, Heritage, So. Hunter Fieweger, F, Cherry Creek, Sr. Austin Gipson, D, Pine Creek, Sr. Simon Herz, D, Chaparral, Sr. Trey Hirschfield, G, Valor Christian, Sr. Mason Hoehn, F, Valor Christian, Sr. Riley Hunt-Bahn, F, Cherry Creek, Jr. Ryan Kotz, F, Glenwood Springs, Sr. John Larchenko, F, Denver East, Sr. Tanner Marsh, C, Fort Collins, So. Jake McCall, D, Valor Christian, Jr. Jackson Mundell, F, Chaparral, Sr. Evan Pahos, F, Valor Christian, Jr. Nolan Sargent, D, Regis Jesuit, Sr. Sam Simon, G, Fort Collins, Jr. Marek Thompson, D, Fort Collins, So. Leighton Walsh, F, Regis Jesuit, Sr. Nolan Williamson, F, Fort Collins, Jr.

Coaching staff: George Gwozdecky (head), Valor Christian; Dan Woodley, Regis Jesuit; Jeff Mielnicki, Cherry Creek; Jeremy Sims, Heritage; Dylan Strom, Fort Collins; Terry Ott, Regis Jesuit; Ralph Bammert, CAHA.

said. “I would think the 10 returning kids will have a great opportunity to return next year, but they’ll have to go through the same selection camp-process and perform through the fall season and the winter season.”

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