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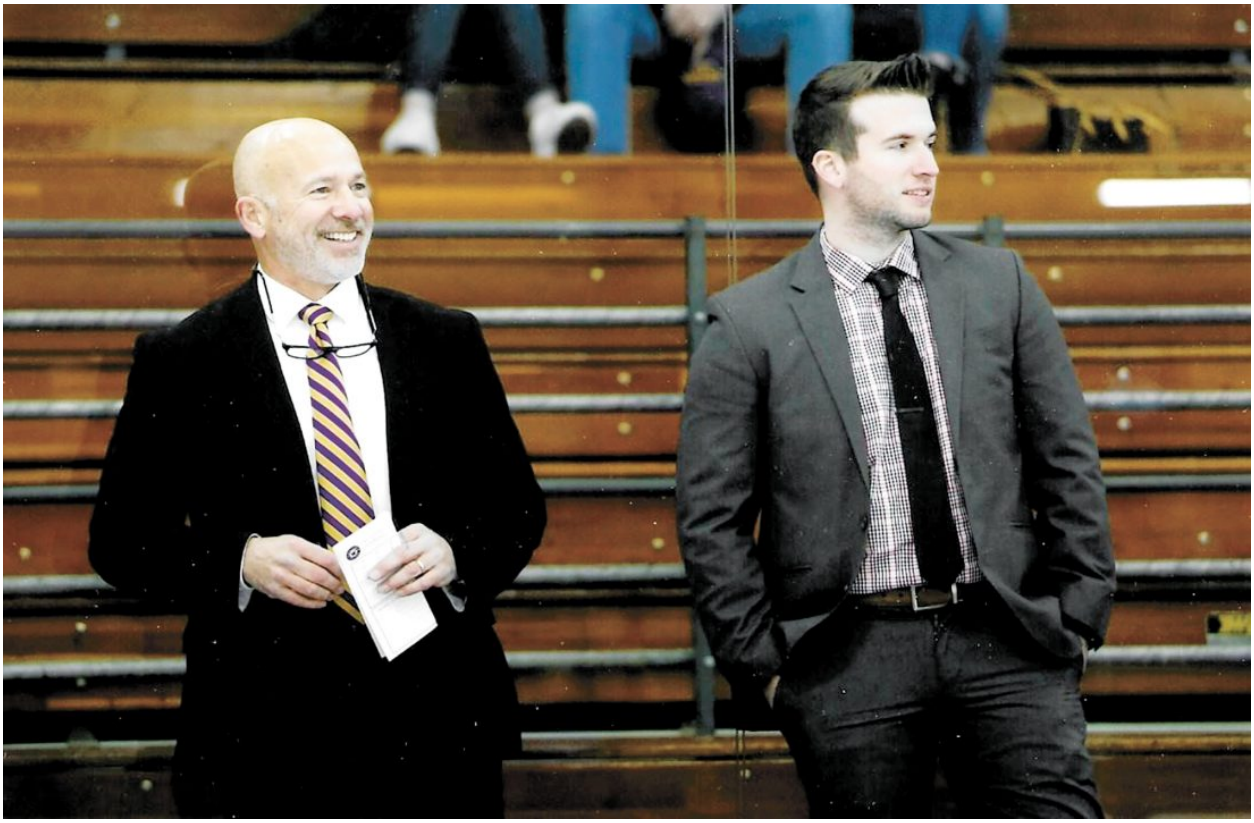
New Rivier ice hockey coach ready to build program

By Tom King - Sports Writer | Dec 12, 2020



First ever River men's hockey coach Eric Sorenson was the top assistant for Williams College legendary coach Bill Kangas, left. (Courtesy photo)

NASHUA – His hero was Dominik Hasek.

Why? Because for Eric Sorenson, growing up in the Rochester, New York, area, near Buffalo, anyone who followed hockey followed the team iconic goaltender Hasek was most associated with, the Buffalo Sabres.

And he wanted to be a goalie.

"I really don't know why," he said. "I don't know if it was the equipment or what. I was a fan of Haskek, I had a poster of him on my wall, and I had a poster of Patrick Roy.

"I remember before I was playing ice hockey I was playing floor hockey at the local YMCA. A coach was doing a drill and I made a save on the coach and all the kids were going 'Ohhhhhhh'. I liked the feeling of taking away a goal when someone was trying to score. You're not always active, but you never come off the ice."

Sorenson didn't start playing ice hockey though, until he was around 10-years-old.

"Obviously, I loved it from the second I got on the ice," Eric Sorenson said.

Good thing, as Sorenson was just recently named the first head men's hockey coach at Rivier University, which announced two months ago it was going to add men's and women's hockey programs to their athletic program.

Enter Sorenson.

"For me it started out as, obviously, the opportunity to be a head coach," Sorenson said. *"In college hockey, they're few and far between; in Division III I think there's 90 jobs now. It's incredibly difficult.*

"And you're building a program that didn't exist. That's also attractive."

Sorenson researched Rivier and felt it would be a great place. *"So, obviously, I threw my name in the ring and was fortunate to come out with the job. I'm happy to be here."*

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Sorenson played three years of high school hockey and then played with a junior program in Syracuse, N.Y. And then he played his college hockey and got a business degree at Western New England University, where he holds the career record for wins (29) and saves (2,175). He was named the ECAC Northeast Goalie of the Week eleven times and was also selected to the All-ECAC Northeast Team (twice) and a three-time member of the All-Academic team

"I had a really good career there," he said, *"and was thankful for my time as a player there."*

In the spring of his junior year, he realized something. He might want to take up a career in coaching. He had worked at various camps, but his main and through one of those he got an internship with the Nashville Predators in their hockey operations department for the summer of 2013.

It was your standard internship, but there was an added attraction for Sorenson.

"The fact I was in the front office, was to me really cool," he said. *"And this was the moment where I figured out where I wanted to be."*

It was during the free agency period that summer in 2013. The Predators were going through their list, figuring out who they were going to target.

"Everyone was involved in the process," he said. *"I thought 'This is kind of fun, this concept of building a team.' … It was fun being a passenger, as I got to listen and watch."*

"For me, I love college hockey. The NHL is awesome, but I'm obviously a big proponent of college hockey. I was sitting there thinking I'd love to build a team someday at the college level."

So that was it. Deal sealed, Sorenson wanted to make hockey coaching a career.

His first coaching job was as an assistant at Nazareth College in Rochester, a school while 10 minutes from where he grew up that he compared to Rivier. *"The enrollment's a little bit larger there,"* he said, *"but the campus feels the same."*

Thus began the education of a future head coach, as Sorenson began coaching under the tutelage of Nazareth head man George Roll, former longtime Clarkson University head coach.

"There's so much he did for my career," Sorenson said of Roll. *"He's an incredibly smart hockey mind, one of the best I've been around. He's also a good person. Anyone who works in sports understands it's not 9 to 5, you can't just shut it off. But he reiterated it's incredibly important to spend time with your family."*

But there was more.

"He really taught me everything about the X's and O's and how to run a program," Sorenson said, adding that Nazareth was only in its third year.

Also, Nazareth had a volunteer assistant who had been the coach for 18 years at St. Cloud State, Craig Dahl. *"So here I am, working with two former Division I head coaches,"* Sorenson said, *"who each kind of had their own flavors."*

Dahl taught Sorenson that *"no one cares how much you know until they know how much you care."* Dahl would show up one day a week, pick out a couple of players in the locker room and tell them old hockey stories.

"So here's George with the X's and O's and here's Craig with managing people," Sorenson said. *"So it was a really good first four years for me."*

Sorenson was definitely a sponge, and he remembers a great moment when Nazareth knocked off the No. 1 team in the country, Oswego, during a Christmas tournament at Norwich.

The beauty, in Sorenson's mind, of working for Roll was that *"he would let me do everything."* Sorenson traveled with the team, recruited, got a glimpse of how to manage the budget for the program each year, practice planning, running practices, video review, scouting, etc. Then there was also the duty of setting up the travel plans (hotels, busses), equipment orders or scheduling equipment rep visits.

In other words, there wasn't an aspect Sorenson didn't see or take part in.

"I'd like to say I did just about everything in that job," he said. *"I was super grateful. And this obviously has prepared me for the early stages here (at Riv), planning the budget, what equipment companies to order from, etc."*

In the summer of 2018, Sorenson then moved on to Williams College in Williamstown, Mass. in the Berkshires. It may have seemed like a lateral move, but it was a move to a good program working for another established coach in 30-year man Bill Kangas and in a good, competitive league.

More education.

"(Kangas) rounded me out as a coach so well," he said. *"To me the biggest thing I learned, was to understand there's the highs and lows, and as he puts it, 'There's always a wrinkle.' Keep your team focused on playing, and you and your staff focused on coaching, and don't worry about the outside factors."*

Sorenson was there in his second year when Kangas eclipsed the 400 win mark.

"I was glad to be a part of that," he said, adding that Williams was ranked in the top 15 nationally, and made it as high as ninth while he was there. And last year Williams won the NESCAC regular season title, although it lost in the conference semis to Wesleyan.

"But to me, one of things I said to the guys, obviously we wanted to win that tournament and be league champions and get that auto (NCAA) bid," Sorenson said, *"but being the best team over an 18 game season to me is a lot more difficult than getting hot at the right time of the year."*

The league was competitive, Sorenson said, with no easy nights.

What made this the right time, after six years as a Division III assistant, for Sorenson to become a head coach?

"I'm someone that's always trying to challenge myself," he said. "I did it when I was playing, I did it when I was coaching. And to me, I just felt I was ready for that next step in my career.

"And to me Rivier was a place that checked all the boxes I had."

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If he was going to leave a highly touted program like Williams, Sorenson wanted to be sure it was a place that was serious about hockey, that had great academics, etc. *"It just felt,"* he said, *"like the right time."*

He found out about a month or so rumors of Rivier starting hockey, and got off the ice in Worcester after a skate, got a text from a friend about the announcement, and thought to himself, *"It's come to fruition."*

So he jumped at it.

All the work of starting a program from scratch appeals to Sorenson.

"It's so exciting," he said. *"I've had conversations with people over the last several years – would you go here, would you go there, would you start a program. It's always been 'Yes.'*

"You have an understanding at the amount of work that's going to go into it. Now you don't really know for sure until you go in. You're the owner, you're the president of the operation, you're the general manager, you're the coach. Everything that people will see next year is the result of the work that's being done now."

And that work has already begun. As Sorenson said, *"The product on the ice, from what the guys are wearing to the day to day operations of it are going to be up to me."*

What kind of a head coach does Sorenson think he'll be?

"I think the beautiful thing about being in two places and working for a lot of different guys," he said. *"No two coaches are the same. I've taken things from all of them."*

The simple thing, he says, is that he would be *"a player's coach"*. But that's too cliché.

"I think everybody would say that," he said. *"But I really do feel like I'm going to be someone that's user friendly. I believe in the power of positivity. I think there's a time and a place to raise your voice, but there has to be an understanding that with a roster of 25-30 guys, you're going to have 25-30 different personalities. They react to the way you speak to them differently."*

That's why Sorenson says he plans on spending a lot of time with the players he brings in for next year to get to know them. *"When the time comes, I'll know that Player A needs to get pushed by this, and Player B needs to get pushed by that."*

And he's designed a way to get a good handle on the pulse of his team. During the season, on Sundays he'll send out a form to all his players that will take about five minutes to fill out.

"They'll let me know how they felt they played that week, how their sleep was," he said, adding it will also include how their week looks, with the purpose of gauging stress. *"If you have a video session planned for Tuesday afternoon and a guy tells me he has a paper due on Wednesday and two mid-terms for Thursday, then we'd cancel that session and move it to later in the week.'*

They'll also add at the end a paragraph in which they can say anything. As an example, if players say their legs are feeling heavy, that may affect the practice plan for Monday. Or they may question the lineup or game plan for a previous game.

"That allows us to have open dialogue," Sorenson said. *"As long as they understand that I'm the decision maker, that I have the final say, I'm going to give them the free speech because that enables me to see where they're coming from, and I'll be honest with them."*

"I don't want guys left in the dark wondering what Coach is thinking."

Recruiting will be interesting, one of those *"wrinkles"* Sorenson's former boss mentioned. He won't be crossing any borders anytime soon to recruit out of Canada, using his contacts and networks instead. He's already been going to games in New England, but with travel bans, etc. he's networking around the rest of the country. Plus, there's modern technology as he'll be able to view games on live streams, plus video, etc.

"The one good thing about 2020 is where we are technologically speaking," he said. *"I can be in my office all day making phone calls and watching games and then go home and go home and watch a game that's being broadcast.*

I think (recruiting) will be difficult, but it will be difficult for everybody. Making use of the various softwares that are out there is going to be crucial, along with the networking."

Sorenson knows that all eyes will be on him and his Raiders women's hockey coaching counterpart, newly hired Chris Czarnota, as they begin the sport's maiden voyage at Rivier.

"There's going to be a lot of people at the university I think," he said, *"that will be proud that they've added hockey."*

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