

KLEE BRINGS VARIETY OF COACHING EXPERIENCE TO THUNDERBIRDS

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Hub exclusive: Former Avs defenseman Ken Klee joined the T-Birds staff this year as a coach for the 16U team.



Ken Klee joins the Colorado Thunderbirds after a long NHL career and years coaching at the youth level, in the AHL and for USA Hockey. Photo submitted by Ken Klee

Ken Klee played more than 900 games in the NHL. Two of his past coaching stints include stops in the American Hockey League and with the U.S. Women's National Team.

"To me, coaching is coaching, whether they're boys or girls, or younger or older," Klee said. "It's still teaching the game that I love and trying to help other people."

Klee is in his first season as an assistant coach with the Colorado Thunderbirds 16U team. He works primarily with the defense and on penalty killing. He joins new assistant coach and former Avs center John Mitchell and head coach David Clarkson, who had an 11-year career with three NHL teams, to give the T-Birds a trio of coaches with plenty of professional playing experience on their resumes.



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Klee and the IIHF Women's World Championship trophy.

The Thunderbirds got off to an undefeated start in September, with nine victories and a tie. They've posted four shutouts and have only allowed two goals in a game twice through the first 10 games.

Klee recognizes 16-year-old players have lots of skill, so his focus is to help instill everyday habits. He and Clarkson know what it takes for players to get to the next level, and those type of things are important, Klee said.

"The everyday habits and doing things right," Klee said. "They have lots of skills, it's just getting them to do it all the time and consistently."

Klee's most recent coaching experience is two seasons spent as the assistant coach of the Syracuse Crunch, the AHL affiliate of the 2020 Stanley Cup Champion Tampa Bay Lightning, where he also worked with defense and the penalty kill. For the 2017-18 season, he helped the Crunch allow fewer than 200 goals in a season for only the second time in team history.

He also coached the U.S. Women's National Team for more than two seasons, winning two World Championship gold medals (in 2015 and 2016) and two Four Nations gold medals. He also coached U8-Midgets at the youth level, winning state titles.

In his playing days, Klee spent 14 seasons in the NHL after he was drafted by Washington in the ninth round of the 1990 NHL Entry Draft. The defenseman scored 55 goals and 195 points in 934 NHL games. He played nine seasons with Washington starting in 1994-95 before adding stops in Toronto, New Jersey, Colorado, Phoenix, Atlanta and Anaheim. He played 81 games for the Colorado Avalanche in 2006-07, recording three goals and 19 points.

Klee retired from professional hockey following the 2008-09 season.

Klee said he got into coaching to helping kids reach their goals and dreams, just like the coaches that helped him along the way growing up through juniors and college on the way to his NHL career path.

"So, I think it's just that passion for the game and just a chance to be able to help people out," Klee said. "I definitely enjoyed it when I was coaching kids and when I was head coach for the women's national team, I enjoyed it."

He likes coaching teenagers, such as those with the Thunderbirds, because players ages 15 or 16 have all the skills of an AHL or NHL player, even if they're not quite as fast or have the entire mental side of the game there yet, he said.

"While I can put expectations on them like I would a professional, I still have to understand that they're teenage boys that are going through learning how to drive and having girlfriends and other things off the ice that maybe when you're a pro, none of that's supposed to factor in, even though it does," Klee said. "So, it's just keeping a high expectation on them but also still realizing they are kids."

(Story continues below photo)



Klee coached the U.S. Women's National Team for more than two seasons, winning two World Championship gold medals (in 2015 and 2016) and two Four Nations gold medals. Photo submitted by Ken Klee

Besides Klee's lengthy playing career and diverse coaching background, there was another reason why the coaching job with the Thunderbirds seemed like a good fit.

Klee's youngest son, David, is a center on the Thunderbirds 16U team. Though Klee has coached David a lot, he sees value in David hearing different voices, those of Clarkson and Mitchell, to help him out with some of the small parts of his game, Klee said.

"It was more just being able to have a chance to come home and also get to work with David, and a good opportunity for my son as well," Klee said. "For him to be coached by another good coach."

David is the third of Klee's sons to play hockey with the Thunderbirds. Garrett, 22, is playing hockey at Northern Michigan, while 21-year-old Mason is playing at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute near Albany, New York. The Klees made Colorado their full-time home when Ken retired from professional hockey in 2009. The older boys were in the midst of playing youth hockey before moving up the ranks to play with the Thunderbirds, juniors and now college hockey.

"They had a great experience with Thunderbirds, so I knew it would be a good fit," Klee said.

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