

Growing Up Gulley

New Home Grown player trained with first team Monday

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New striker Kellen Gulley took to the training pitch for the first time Monday morning following last Thursday's announcement that the 17-year-old Chicago Fire Juniors-Mississippi product would become the club's second Home Grown player.

Following Victor Pineda's signing as the Fire's first Home Grown talent last summer, Gulley also became the first player from one of the club's three satellite Fire Juniors affiliates in the southeast (Mississippi, Louisiana and Florida) to sign with the first team.

Gulley's signing is the biggest part of with the Chicago Fire Juniors satellite partnership which began in Jackson, MS in 2005 according to the club's Director of Player Development John Dorn.

"We went down there in preseason and had a first team game against Chivas USA. They treated our guys like kings and we could tell we were onto something good there."

It didn't hurt the partnership to have former Fire midfielder Justin Mapp hailing from the state. The soft-spoken Gulley remembered the team's 2005 trip well and pointed to Mapp's words and example as a reason for wanting to join the Fire.



"I've wanted to play for the Fire since I was really young," he said Monday. "The first team visited us in Mississippi when I was 10 years old and Justin was on the team then. He told us all about the time he had here and seeing another player from Mississippi come back year after year with the Fire made me want to be a part of the club."

A highly touted prospect with the Mississippi Juniors, the next year Gulley began a string of five consecutive summer visits to Chicago train with various Fire youth teams. In addition to training with the club's first team, PDL and Super-20 sides in 2010, he's appeared in three consecutive Generation

adidas/SUM Cups with the Fire Academy (2009-11). Dorn contends that with no U.S. Soccer Developmental Academy program in the state of Mississippi, the CFJ presence in that state as well as Louisiana is vital for development of those players.

“Those CFJ clubs are fundamentally the main point of competition for elite level players in those areas,” he said. “That underlines the point of why we do affiliations from a player development standpoint. To get players like that exposure in environments and arenas that they wouldn’t otherwise have because they’re not MLS markets. The payback on our end is finding a player in Kellen and he ends up right here with our first team. It’s a proud day to see him come through and be an official member of the team up here.”

A veteran of eight international caps for the U.S. U17 Men’s National Team, Gulley was named to U.S. Soccer’s Residency program in January 2010 and would have likely been a part of this summer’s U17 World Championship team if not for an ACL injury which occurred last year.

Playing in his first “intense” training session since surgery on his ACL last year, Gulley felt positive about the experience of playing with the first team.

“It was good to get out with the guys,” said Gulley after his first training session Monday. “I feel fine. I need to get my fitness level a little bit higher and I’ll be good to go. I already know a few guys on the team so that makes things easier but I’ve gotten along so far and I’m looking forward to working back into form.”

Gulley, who will wear #94 in reflection of his birthyear, will have plenty of time to find his form before seeing first team minutes. Part of his moving to Chicago this summer was to fulfill the required two years of “residency” mandated under Major League Soccer’s “Home Grown Initiative”. He will officially be a squad player for the first team come the start of the 2012 season but the striker will be available for selection in the team’s remaining 2011 MLS Reserve League fixtures as well as being a part of the 2011-12 U18 Chicago Fire U.S. Soccer Development Academy side.

Familiar Mississippi Faces

After being away at U.S. Soccer Residency in Bradenton, FL, Gulley is used to being away from home, but will be joined in Chicago by two other CFJ-Mississippi products who are moving to the area to play for the Fire’s U16 Development Academy side this year.



“Kellen’s just one example of the job CFJ-Mississippi does in producing quality players. Hayden Cochrane and Mark Epps are two other players from the club that are coming up this summer to join our Academy. They’ve played with us at other events and felt like they needed to get into an MLS Academy

program in order to continue their development. We're five years in and have taken that step with our Academy, bring more players in from the satellites is a great achievement and answers those that asked, 'Why Mississippi?', 'Why Louisiana?'".

Similar to last summer with the announcement of Pineda, the club is stressing Gulley's need for time for further development. Meaning any expectation of him starting in next season's First Kick match is unrealistic.

"In Kellen we have a great player that has tremendous potential to contribute to this club in the future but any immediate expectation is premature," said Director of Player Personnel Mike Jeffries. "The fact that he's not able to play for the first team this season takes a little pressure off but we think his ability to still play with the Reserves and Academy will be a good easing in to the first team for him when he becomes eligible at the start of next season."