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Wilmette natives reunite on U-17 national boys hockey team

By **HEATHER RULE**
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USA Hockey National Team Development Program defenseman Alex Vlasic and goaltender Cameron Rowe are both Wilmette natives. (Rena Lavery/USA Hockey)

Cameron Rowe and Alex Vlasic are teammates on the U.S. National Team Development Program U-17 hockey team, but their connections run much deeper.

They're both Wilmette natives and the 16-year-olds were born four days apart in June. Thus, they played a lot of hockey together, and sometimes against each other, while growing up and have a lot of shared memories.



One game in particular stands out to them: [**Winning the 2010 International Novice AA Silver Stick Championship 2-1 in triple overtime**](#) with the Wilmette Braves Mite Elite hockey team.

"It was basically an adrenaline rush," Rowe said. "In that moment, all you're focused on is winning the game."

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That's also the game Rowe realized he enjoyed the pressure of being the goaltender and knew he wanted to be a hockey player. Rowe said he liked his position because he knew that he "could make a difference in the game."

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Vlasic's father coached that team, and it's a game Vlasic said he and his dad still talk about all the time, as does Rowe. It was an unforgettable experience for those two and a lot of guys they grew up playing hockey with, Vlasic said.

The history between these two starts when they were 6 years old. They played youth hockey together until they were 12 years old, then they played against each other until this season when they were reunited with the U.S. National Team Development Program in Plymouth, Mich. Vlasic and Rowe each stay with a billet family and attend different public high schools in Michigan.

"We both had the same sort of beginning, so we both understand why we love hockey," Rowe said.

Vlasic looms large as a nearly 6-foot-6 defenseman who's a two-way threat with 15 points (five goals, 10 assists) in 24 games. He also brings the energy and comedy to the team, Rowe said, and tries to cheer teammates up and never let them get too negative.

As a goaltender, the 6-1 Rowe knows his role is a bit different than the skaters on the team. Rowe, who has a 9-3-0 record, said he also tries to be positive, offering encouragement for his defensemen if they make a mistake.

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As members of the U.S. National Under-17 Team, they helped Team USA win the Under-17 Four Nations Tournament in Russia earlier this month. Team USA beat Russia 2-1 in a shootout in its third and final game, getting the victory after Russia scored a power-play goal late in the third period.

Rowe did not play in that game, but he got the 7-2 victory over Switzerland. Team USA also beat Slovakia 12-0.

Vlasic, who is cousins with San Jose Sharks defenseman Marc-Edouard Vlasic, tallied one assist against both Slovakia and Switzerland.

Playing in Russia was a new experience for everyone, Rowe said. With ongoing political tensions between Russia and the United States, the Team USA coaches stressed that the players' job at the tournament was to play hockey and focus on hockey, Rowe said.

Still, the hockey rivalry between the U.S. and Russia was ever-present, from officiating to fan reactions. Team USA had to earn its success and keep its cool since the players knew right from the start of the tournament that the referees weren't going to call anything their way, Vlasic said.

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In the final, Team USA was whistled for six penalties and Russia was assessed one.

"I think that was a big lesson we learned there," Vlasic said. "If things aren't going your way, just keep going, keep persevering because the lucky bounces are going to go your way if you keep putting in the hard work."

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Vlasic is committed to play hockey for Boston U., while Rowe is a Nebraska-Omaha commit, but for now they're just glad to have each other to lean on and train with in the offseason.

"It's just kind of nice having someone that's there for you and knows you so well," Vlasic said.

Heather Rule is a freelance reporter for Pioneer Press.

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