

## Local pair playing with U.S. National Junior Sled Hockey team

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**Steve Vedder | The Grand Rapids Press**



Grand Rapids Press File Photo

Chris Melton, above, and Tyler Anderson are veterans of the Grand Rapids Sled Wings program. For Chris Melton, the toughest part was waiting to see if a long-standing dream would come true.

The 16-year-old Zeeland East junior figured he had done all he could to make the 2010-11 U.S. National Junior Sled Hockey team.

Melton thought he had played well enough in June at the team's training camp in Rochester, N.Y., to earn consideration, but making the elite team still was a roll of the dice.

Melton kept asking a returning member of the team -- Tyler Anderson, a 2009 Jenison graduate -- whether he had done enough to make the team, which is comprised of players from eight states.

"In the back of my head, I thought it would be cool to make it," Melton said. "I kept asking him how I was doing and what my chances were. He said I had a solid chance of making it.

"I just hoped I had done well enough."

In the end, Melton and Anderson, now a freshman at Grand Rapids Community College, both did enough.

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The defensemen were named to the 17-player team that gathers this week for training camp in Buffalo. The team will host games there and play exhibitions against the Canadian junior team in Nova Scotia.

Melton and Anderson are veterans of the Grand Rapids Sled Wings program, which is sponsored by the Grand Rapids Griffins and Mary Free Bed Rehabilitation Hospital.

"One of the things (the national coaches) look for is skill, but also teamwork," Grand Rapids Sled Wings coach Lynnette Eding said. "They told the players they would be watching them in the cafeteria or going down the road.

"It's not just hockey they look at, it's their attitudes off the ice in addition to being good athletes."

Sled hockey has been played in the U.S. since the late 1980s, and the national team won the gold medal at the 2002 Paralympics in Salt Lake City.

The sport is open to players with physical disabilities such as amputation, spinal cord injuries and wheelchair users, as well as those with cerebral palsy, brain injuries and who have suffered a stroke.

Anderson and Melton were born with spina bifida.

Players propel themselves around regulation-size arenas on sleds with two 3-foot spikes inserted into the ends of sticks, which allow players to push themselves along the ice while shooting and passing.

Anderson, who delivered the news to Melton that he made the team, was a member of the 2009-10 junior team.

Anderson said his experience was a significant factor in being picked for this year's team.

"Experience at that level is great," he said. "Coming back for a second year, I knew what to expect.

"I took that experience back to Grand Rapids and tried to become a better player. It's a honor to play. Being able to represent your country is a big thing."

Making the elite hockey team is another notch in their sports resumes.

Melton plays on the JV tennis team at Zeeland East, has participated in a downhill skiing program at Cannonsburg, and has played wheelchair basketball for the Grand Rapids Wheelchair Sports Association.

Anderson has played for the Grand Rapids Junior Pacers wheelchair basketball team and is a member of the Grand Rapids Wheelchair Sports Association tennis and cycling teams.

With the initial tryout camp including 30 players from all over the country, Melton said the competition was intense.

"You definitely have to perform up to their expectations and level," he said. "In the past two years, I pushed myself hard to

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get noticed and make the team. You play the best you can, and then sit and wait. I just put myself out there."

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