

CORALVILLE, Iowa – North Iowa Bulls alumni **Brett Gravelle** and **Jeff Solow** began the week just an hour apart, but hadn't played together in more than five-and-a-half years and weren't even in the same league. Gravelle was already in the throes of a hot start to the 2021-22 Southern Professional Hockey League season while Solow was just getting settled into his first professional season with the Iowa Heartlanders of the ECHL, after going without game action since March of 2020.

By the end of the night on Wednesday, the two former teammates had reunited and Gravelle had already made himself into a fan favorite in the Corridor. The former Bull and one-time NA3HL single-season goal-scoring record-holder piled up two goals and an assist in Wednesday's home game against the Wheeling Nailers, including a game-tying goal with just over 90 seconds remaining, in Iowa's 4-3 overtime loss. Gravelle's game-tying marker appeared to go off of his head and into the net, but a later look revealed the puck bounced off of the collar of his jersey and caromed in – in fact, Gravelle had moved his head just in time, already dealing with a black eye from a high hit from Wheeling's Tyler Drevitch during the second period.

The Heartlanders called him up to the ECHL from the SPHL's Quad City Storm, where he rolled up two goals and five assists in the first four games of the season.

"It's been a pretty crazy week," said Gravelle. "You go to practice on Monday, and I got a call from my coach in Quad City (Dave Pszenyczny) saying, 'You're going up to Iowa City.' I'm extremely grateful for the opportunity to come here and get a chance to play, and hopefully I can make it stick."

The game brought about a rare opportunity for two former Bulls to meet in the pros – Solow and Gravelle had played together during North Iowa's 2015-16 Silver Cup championship season, the Bulls' most recent Tier III national championship run prior to 2021. While Gravelle stayed for the entire season and posted 99 points on his way to the NA3HL's Most Valuable Player award, Solow played a key midseason role with 20 appearances. The Bulls won 19 of those games, and he saw the majority of the team's 27-game winning streak, itself a league record at the time.

They briefly ran into each other again at the University of St. Thomas in 2017, while Gravelle was attending college and playing for the Tommies, but the two didn't see each other again until Gravelle arrived in Coralville this week.

"They said they were bringing in a couple of guys, and I can't remember who I was talking to who said 'Brett Gravelle,' and I said, 'Brett Gravelle? Wait a minute,'" said Solow. "I was pretty fired up when they said he was coming in."

"The news travels fast in the hockey world," said Gravelle. "An hour-and-a-half later, I got a message from Jeff. We've kept in touch a bit over the years, a few texts. We were both pretty excited to reunite that connection."

Solow was named to the Heartlanders' training camp roster in early October and made the team, but did not appear in an official game until Saturday, a 5-3 loss at the Kansas City Mavericks. The journey back for him was a 20-month sojourn, including a 2020-21 season at NCAA Division III Oswego State University in New York that stopped several times before it could ever begin.

"I had one year of school left, so I had to go back for my senior year (in 2020-21)," said Solow. "We were supposed to play a shortened season, and when we first got there, we were working on pods and everything. That got canceled, and then February came around, and they had come out with another schedule for a shortened season, and then a few days later they said, 'Nope, you're done.' I was training in Boston the whole summer – skating, on-ice, off-ice, the whole nine yards. I put in as much work as I could to prepare myself for this. It's paying off in baby steps."

Gravelle saw his final weeks of junior hockey called off in March of 2020, when COVID first shut down the hockey world. He would sign with the SPHL's Quad City Storm and the Federal Prospects Hockey League's Danbury Hat Tricks before finally finding a landing spot in Elmira, New York with the FPHL's Enforcers.

“I was just grateful to be playing hockey at that point,” said Gravelle. “Obviously, there are more important things going on in the world, and last year had its ups and downs. At the end of the day, it was still good hockey and I was thankful to be playing.”

While Solow continues to hunt for his first points in professional hockey, Gravelle is hoping to cement his spot on the Heartlanders’ roster. Both know that a roster spot in the ECHL can be fleeting – after all, Thursday’s roster movement saw five players either leave Coralville or make their way to town, and the league is sometimes referred to as the “Ever Changing Hockey League.”

“You never know if you’re going to be up or down,” said Solow, “so you play like it’s your last game and your last practice.”

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