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HIGH SCHOOL

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Field goal: Raise \$500,000 to fund tundra turf

Bartram Trail is part of a project to provide a playing surface for an Alaskan high school football team.

By JASON SCHNEIDER, The Times-Union

It's a long way from Barrow, Alaska, to Bartram Trail High School, but Cathy Parker is intent on making those thousands of miles seem much shorter.



Cathy Parker, wife of Bartram Trail offensive coordinator Carl Parker, unveils an initiative Wednesday to raise \$500,000 for an artificial football field for the Barrow Whalers, who play on tundra in Alaska. TERRY BROWN/The Times-Union

After seeing a story about the fledgling Barrow Whalers football program, which plays and practices on a dirt and gravel field, Parker, the wife of Bartram Trail offensive coordinator Carl Parker, decided to do anything she could to help the Whalers, even if that included a military airlift.

Parker, along with Bartram Trail, the Jaguars, ProGrass and the Grimes Companies, formed Project Alaska, which aims to raise \$500,000 to have an artificial field installed in Barrow, which is above the Arctic Circle. Grass doesn't grow there.

Carl Parker said Project Alaska already had received \$500 from The Bolles School and Trinity Christian, and that Jacksonville University coach Kerwin Bell also pledged to help.

"This is not a Bartram Trail project, not a Jacksonville project, not a Florida project. This is something for everyone to support," Cathy Parker said.

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The Whalers were the focus of an ESPN SportsCenter story in October and also were featured in a two-part series on ESPN.com.

Cathy Parker cried when she saw the SportsCenter piece. Her husband and three sons, including Bears quarterback Kyle Parker, laughed when she said she wanted to have a field built for the Barrow team. But after months of talking and convincing, Project Alaska was officially unveiled Wednesday afternoon on the Bartram Trail football field.

"I was asked by one of the people in Barrow why I'm so interested, since we have nothing in common," Cathy Parker said. "I told her she was wrong. We have our sons in common. I've seen what athletics and football can do for young men. I know football will make a difference [in Barrow]."

ProGrass, which installed the field at The Bolles School, will manufacture the surface in Dalton, Ga., and assemble it in Barrow.

Steve Coleman, a regional director for ProGrass, is confident the turf that the company plans on installing will withstand the temperatures in Barrow, where they can drop below minus-50 degrees in the winter.

Coleman said there are artificial fields in Wisconsin and Canada. According to ESPN.com, there are artificial fields in Anchorage and Juneau, but they are much farther south in Alaska than Barrow.

The biggest obstacle is getting the field to Alaska. Barrow is only accessible by plane and boat, and water access is limited to a few months

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Parker had hoped that the Florida Air National Guard could airlift the field to Barrow, but the airfield there can't accommodate large cargo planes.

Ike Sherlock, director of fleet operations for Grimes Trucking, said several groups are in the process of developing a plan to move the field components from Georgia to Washington and then Alaska. Project Alaska is hoping to have the field delivered in July, when temperatures are the warmest.

Coleman said installation would take three weeks to a month.

Project Alaska also plans to bring the Whalers to Jacksonville on May 17-19 to participate in the Bears' summer workouts and clinics. Bartram Trail families will host players, and the Jaguars have committed to hosting them for a day at Jacksonville Municipal Stadium.

"We are supporting this effort, but we are still working on what form that will take," Jaguars vice president Dan Edwards said. "Certainly, we'd like to have [the Whalers] visit us and perhaps practice on one of our practice fields."

The Jaguars also are helping to steer the Whalers through the NFL's Grassroots Program, which provides youth football programs with financial and technical assistance.

Parker hopes that, if Project Alaska can raise \$250,000, the NFL would match that through the Grassroots Program. Any money left over would be used to offset football costs for Barrow, which can spend \$20,000 to fly in opponents.

For more information or to donate to Project Alaska, visit www.projectalaskaturf.com.

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