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Mission accomplished for Barrow football

Fundraising effort gives Barrow a new \$500,000 football field

By DANNY MARTIN
Fairbanks Daily News-Miner
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BARROW -- Cathy Parker finally saw the fruit of her labor.

The 42-year-old bank account executive and football mom from Jacksonville, Fla., was on the sidelines Friday night when the Barrow Whalers played the first game on their new \$500,000 field, the result of a national fundraising drive engineered by Parker.

"It was beautiful," Parker said Friday afternoon at the Inupiat Heritage Center here.

"I tried to describe it when I e-mailed my family ... and it was so hard to put it into words," she said. "The only thing I could think of was it looks like God stamped the top of the world with a hundred yards of the most beautiful blue and gold you've ever seen."

The field is blue with gold lettering and numerals. Blue and gold are the Barrow Whalers' colors, and blue is also the color of the Arctic Ocean, about 100 yards from the field.

The magic of the new field extended to the game, in which Barrow scored two late touchdowns to pull out a dramatic 18-16 victory over the Seward Seahawks in the Whalers' season-opener.

Parker was honored often throughout the game, and the field was named after her.

Parker's fundraising drew national media attention. National Football League Hall of Fame running back Larry Csonka was among the nearly 3,000 in attendance, and ABC, NBC, CNN and ESPN have all done stories on the effort. Pennsylvania-based Black Diamond Sports broadcast Friday night's game live on the Internet.

The new field is less than mile up Narl Road from the Whalers' old home -- a dirt field where last Aug. 19 Barrow faced Delta Junction in the first high school football game above the Arctic Circle.

Cody Gleason didn't play football last year for Barrow, but he saw a video of a game on the dirt field, which often led to ankle injuries for the Whalers.

"It was rowdy," Gleason said.

Gleason walked over the new field on Wednesday and the Whalers junior tight end and defensive end loved it.

"It's pretty neat. It's soft and it feels good," Gleason said.

Barrow's dirt field spurred Parker to start Project Alaska Turf to bring an artificial turf field to the northernmost city in the nation after she saw a segment about the Whalers in November on ESPN's SportsCenter.



JOHN WAGNER / Fairbanks Daily News-Miner via The Associated Press

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Barrow football team members take a victorious dip into the Arctic Ocean after beating Seward 18-16 Aug. 17, 2007, in Barrow. The Whalers players will no longer have to scrape their bodies on cold hard gravel or mark the field for every game.

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Three of Parker's four children play football for Jacksonville's Bartram Trail High School. And her husband, Carl, a former National Football League wide receiver, is the team's offensive coordinator and tight ends coach. Bartram Trail also plays on artificial grass.

LONG TRIP NORTH

Barrow's new field was trucked from a Dalton, Ga., facility of field manufacturer Pro Grass, which is based in Pennsylvania. The rubber mulch that goes underneath the field came from Seattle and the decals for the field were transported from Pennsylvania.

After arriving in Anchorage from Tacoma, Wash., the field and its components were trucked to Fairbanks.

Alaska companies Sourdough Trucking and Carlile Transportation volunteered to truck the materials to Deadhorse along the Haul Road. Northern Air Cargo volunteered to fly everything from Deadhorse to Barrow.

Players from Seward High School, Barrow's opponent Friday night, saw the field for the first time on Wednesday.

"It's awesome," said Andrew Ferkinhoff, a sophomore tailback for Seward. "It's soft, like walking on a bathroom carpet."

"Our field," junior two-way lineman Ryan Dunno said in comparison, "is just this giant mud pit."

Would the Seahawks like to have a similar field?

"It would be sweet," Dunno said.

Sweet also describes the responses Parker received for the project. Monetary and in-kind donations came from individuals and businesses from Florida to Alaska.

"It was such a great surprise to me, especially people in other states who wanted to help," she said.

She was particularly touched by donations from senior citizens on tight budgets.

"They would say we're on a fixed income and we're retired," said Parker, "but we have grandchildren and we have sons and daughters that athletics meant a lot to, and we want to help the youth."

Delbert Rexford, project manager for the Ukpeagvik Inupiat Corp., which installed the field, echoed similar sentiments in a stirring speech during a media conference that recognized people who contributed to the project.

"We are taking a step forward into a new arena to build character and strengthen our children's values, our youth and future leaders of tomorrow," Rexford said. "We enter a new era for our youth, as we have heard the cries of our elders at our annual meetings that our children are in dire need of alternative programs and activities to further build their character, their dignity, their integrity.

"Today, this moment," he continued, "we have in place a football field for our youth and community members as a whole to assist in combating the many social ills that attack, destroy and kill the character of a sound mind and body of a person."

Rexford also thanked "the remarkable Cathy Parker for her vision to make this football field a reality."

STIRRING COMEBACK

The good feelings surrounding the field seemed to infect the Whalers late in the second half Friday night.

With just 35 seconds to play and Barrow on Seward's 4-yard-line trailing 16-12, Whalers quarterback Albert Gerke rolled to his left and hurled a pass to the back of the end zone, where teammate Luke George had positioned himself.

Seward defensive lineman Alan Logan tipped the pass. "They touched it," George said, "and it fell in my hands."

The crowd erupted.

Barrow's comeback began with safety Robert Vigo recovering an on-side kick at the Seward 46 yard-line. Gerke then engineered a seven-play drive to give Barrow only its second win since starting football last year.

"Our kids played a good game," said Seward head coach Kelly Cinereski, "but (Barrow) had a

storybook ending."

Gerke, who took over for Barrow starter Cody Romaine late in the second half, trimmed Seward's lead to 16-12 after scoring on a 9-yard run with 2:47 left in the fourth quarter to cut Seward's lead to 16-12.

"Our kids showed so much character," said Barrow head coach Mark Voss.

Parker cheered along with the rest of the crowd, warmed by a long, blue parka presented to her by the North Slope Borough School District.

Although the 50-degree weather was warm by Barrow standards, it's been above 90 degrees in Jacksonville for months.

"We've been cold since we've been here and I heard these really keep you warm," Parker said while putting on the parka. "It's true, they do ... this is awesome!"

"I can really cheer loud now that I'm warm."

Seward 0 9 7 0 -- 16

Barrow 0 6 0 12 -- 18

Second Quarter

Barrow -- Edwards 2 run (kick failed), 5:21.

Seward -- Safety (Coon sack Gerke in end zone), 4:00.

Seward -- Coon 19 run (Beck kick), :44.

Third Quarter

Seward -- Spurr 23 pass from Beck (Beck kick), 5:06.

Fourth Quarter

Barrow -- Gerke 9 run (run failed), 2:47.

Barrow -- George 4 pass from Gerke (run failed), :35.

SEW BAR

First downs 10 13

Rushes-yards 30-106 38-72

Comp-Att-Int 9-26-2 13-24-1

Passing yards 85 155

Return yards 54 109

Punts-avg. 5-30.2 4-31.3

Fumbles-lost 5-2 8-4

Penalties-yards 12-76 13-88

INDIVIDUAL STATISTICS

RUSHING -- Seward: Coon 9-92, Romero 5-31, Spurr 4-13, Ferkinhoff 2-1, Thorn 2-(-5), Prochazka 1-(-7), Beck 7-(-19). Barrow: Edwards 20-43, George 8-40, Sanders 1-(-1), Gerke 6-(-1), Romaine 3-(-9).

PASSING -- Seward: Beck 9-25-2-85, Coon 0-1-0-0, Prochazka 0-0-0-0. Barrow: Gerke 10-19-0-116, Romaine 3-5-1-39.

RECEIVING -- Seward: Spurr 5-58, Berry 1-13, Mitchell 1-11, Perea 1-6, Beck 1-(-3). Barrow: Edwards 4-44, Sanders 4-36, George 2-32, Fishel 2-29, Evikana 1-14.

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