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The premiere college basketball event in Alaska is underway.

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Barrow football could receive artificial-turf

By ALEX deMARBAN
Anchorage Daily News

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When the Barrow Whalers played their first football game on a finger-numbing day in August, they quieted naysayers who said high school football would never come to the Arctic.

Now a Florida woman who heard about the team's first season wants to help make the sport stick in the nation's northernmost community.

If starting a football team in Barrow was unlikely -- the nearest opponent is more than 500 miles away -- Cathy Parker's idea seems just as improbable.

The Jacksonville-area accountant says she intends to raise \$500,000 for an artificial-turf field to replace the gravelly stretch of dirt beside the Arctic Ocean that bloodied players last year. The money will cover the cost of buying, shipping and installing 160 tons of artificial turf in Alaska.

"It's going to be like an NFL field here in the Lower 48," said the spunky football mom last week. "It's going to be awesome. Barrow will have a second-to-none field, and it will happen."

She got the idea last fall after her sons saw a documentary about the team on ESPN, made by a crew that flew to Barrow to witness the team's opening games. She was impressed by the players' passion, and by boosters who defied odds to create the team.

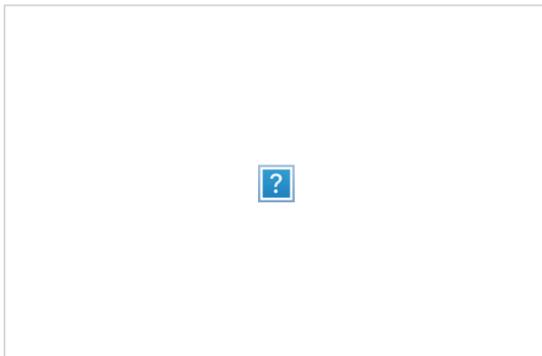
After all, flying opponents to Barrow can cost \$20,000 per game, said Trent Blankenship, superintendent for the North Slope Borough School District.

But the program was greatly needed in the Inupiat village of 4,200, Blankenship said. The school's 50 percent dropout rate mostly involves males, he said, and football gives boys something to do in the summer. Too many are drinking and getting in trouble, Blankenship said.

Students responding to a survey last spring said they wanted more extracurricular activities. Football topped the list, though many students had never seen a game in person.

After a clinic in June, about 40 boys, about one-third of the high school's males, made the team. Men who hadn't coached in years taught football fundamentals: how to cradle the ball, block and tackle.

To pay for the first season, Blankenship used a one-time cash infusion from the Legislature meant to help rural schools. The



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Scott Wolgemuth of Scott Superior Painting donated his talents and materials last August to paint yard-line numbers on the dirt field near Barrow for the town's first football game. A Florida woman is behind an effort to raise \$500,000 to get an artificial turf field for the community.

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money paid for travel and bought snazzy blue-and-gold uniforms, training equipment and helmets.

Some residents criticized the team's six-figure budget and the focus on athletics instead of books, among other things. But hundreds turned out for the first game. Volunteers rolled telephone poles to the sidelines for seating, and built goalposts from leftover pipe. Rumbling buses served as locker rooms where players escaped frigid winds.

The effort was inspiring, said Parker.

Her husband, Carl, an NFL wide receiver in the late 1980s, now coaches high school football. Two of her boys play for the team, staying busy most of the year with training, weightlifting and scrimmages. Football also helps her community south of Jacksonville bond.

"We know as parents that (a football program) will make a difference for generations to come," she said.

The team has inspired others in Florida, she said. Jacksonville-area residents have helped create a fundraising nonprofit called Project Alaska. A Web site should debut late this month where people can give to the Whalers, she said.

She and her husband are asking NFL officials for a grant, she said. A banker has promised \$100,000, she said. Navy and Air National Guard officials are looking into flying or barging the football field to Barrow.

The field will be a lot easier to maintain, she said. Last season, volunteers in Barrow mixed flour with the white paint for hash marks so it would stick to the dirt. But gulls kept eating the mixture, she said.

ProGrass, a Pennsylvania company selling artificial turf, will subtract at least \$75,000 from the \$400,000 cost of a field, said Steve Coleman, regional sales director in Tampa Bay.

The company hopes to install the field in July, when the weather should be warm enough, he said. Because glue might not survive the winter's 50-below cold, panels could be attached with Velcro, he said.

The plastic blades and crushed rubber padding have weathered subzero streaks in Wisconsin and other states, Coleman said, so they should hold up to Barrow's cold. If the blades do crack, the artificial turf will still be "night-and-day better than anything they've got going," he said.

"They won't have bandages all over them as they're playing," he said.

ProGrass higher-ups have told him to make the Barrow field a reality, because football can channel aggression for at-risk boys while boosting morale for schools and athletes, he said.

The football program has changed "the whole climate of the school," Blankenship said. The Whalers won one of six games, but that didn't diminish the players' enthusiasm.

"Attitude was way up, especially with the boys," he said. "The grades with boys were higher, and kids were excited about football."

In part because of football, the school's graduation rate should be up 30 percent this spring, he said, with nearly two-thirds of the class receiving diplomas.

Blankenship wouldn't give the names of students who have improved. Neither would Michael Gonzales, a junior and the team's center, who's a star wrestler for the school.

Some students who wouldn't normally care about school are definitely more motivated to come to class and work for better grades to stay on the team, he said.

"It gives them something to do," he said.

With the first season behind them, the Whalers will improve next year, Blankenship said.

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Linemen, including several kids weighing 265 pounds who don't play other sports, will begin drilling in the snow this week, he said.

The team has eight games scheduled next year, including the first-ever Pipeline Bowl with Valdez, honoring the 800-mile line that sends oil from the North Slope to Prince William Sound.

And the team might get lessons in Florida this May. Blankenship talked to Parker for the first time last month, he said. He was awestruck by what she'd already organized, he said.

Parker told him the Whalers have been invited to travel to Florida to train with the Bartram Trail Bears, where Carl Parker coaches, Blankenship said. If the Whalers can pay their way to Jacksonville, restaurateurs and other business owners have promised free room and board, she said.

The team will start raising money for the trip soon, Blankenship said.

"Words fail me," he said. "I don't even know how to say thank you to people who would do such a thing. It's amazing."

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