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METRO

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## Jacksonville woman helps Alaskans score pretty touchdown

By **BRENDAN HALL**, The Times-Union

Forty-degree August temperatures are unheard of in Jacksonville. But Cathy Parker was in Alaska, watching the Barrow High Whalers kick off their season on a newly donated blue turf football field.

So excuse her if she was taken aback when, after the game, she approached a native at midfield who wasn't wearing shoes.

"She said to me, 'I took my shoes off because it's a brand new carpet, and I don't want to mess it up,' " Parker explained.

See, the terrain in Barrow, a tiny town of roughly 4,000 nestled above the Arctic Circle, is harsh. Grass can't grow there, the northernmost point in the United States, nor can trees. There are no paved roads, just paths.

Instead, residents traverse on sheets of tundra and frozen mud - in every playground,

every trail, every yard.

The isolation has also led to tribulation. According to vice principal and athletic director Mike Weatherbee, Barrow's dropout rate tinkers around 30 percent. Suicide and drug abuse have also been problems.

It all saddened Parker, just as it did when she initially got wind of the story one night last fall. Her sons, who play football at Bartram Trail High School, were watching ESPN's *Outside the Lines* when she came across a segment about Barrow High's football team.

"Any time we can get any kids to do any activity, we're winning the game," Weatherbee said. "It costs us \$40,000 to house an inmate. A couple of those could pay for the season."

The idea of starting up a football team as a means of lifting up community was good in theory, but poor in practice. Their field's surface was a layer of gravel.

So when Parker saw the story, she went right to work. So far she has raised \$650,000 in donations from all over the country - short of the \$800,000 goal, but enough to lay down the essentials.

Folks got to work at all hours of the night - on trucks, on boats, on trains, on airplanes, and with help from 10 different companies - to bring in all the various materials needed to put the thing together.

Today, the field is blue, with gold end zones, reflecting the school's colors, and sits just 100 yards from the Arctic Ocean. Parker told the Times-Union it looked "like God had stamped the top of the world with the most beautiful blue and gold. It stood out like a jewel."

### BARROW, ALASKA

**Population:** 4,218

**Latitude:** 71 degrees **Longitude:** 156 degrees

**Average temperature (Fahrenheit) Summer:** 45-50 degrees **Winter:** -20 degrees

**Fun facts** - It is the northernmost town in the United States - The sun disappears from the horizon for two months each year between November and January, and then doesn't set for several weeks in the summer - The horror comic book series "30 Days of Night" is set in Barrow. A film adaptation of the series, starring Josh Hartnett, hits theaters in October - Last May, Golden Baseball League CEO Dave Kaval changed the Long Beach Armada's name to "Long Beach Armada of Los Angeles of California of the United States of North America including Barrow, Alaska."

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And the natives, many of whom are Inupiat, took the field as a blessing - literally. At half-time, the head elder of the town led everyone in prayer as they thanked God for their field.

As it turned out, all that praying foreshadowed the Whalers' 11th-hour comeback against Seward High.

Down 10 points with three minutes to go, the Whalers scored twice - including the game-winning touchdown pass that bounced off two defenders' hands into the mitts of Luke George - and proceeded to celebrate the 18-16 victory with a ceremonial jump into the Arctic Ocean.

Some spectators preferred to stay in their cars during the game, which started off hovering about 40 degrees, honking their horns and flashing their lights after good plays and touchdowns.

Still others stood near the sidelines, as close as possible to the turf, sometimes hugging players after good plays. Parker estimated the crowd at anywhere from 2,500 to 3,000 - more than three-fourths of the town.

Weatherbee says Parker was treated "like royalty" during her stay, and as a token of appreciation was given a parka lined with white fox and beaver furs - which he called "monstrously beautiful."

Still, Barrow's weather can unnerve an out-of-towner. According to Parker, fellow Bartram Trail football parent Vicki Griffis - who also made the trek - suggested an idea more suitable for a warm-blooded Floridian.

"She said to me jokingly, 'Next time you have a vision, will you make sure it has palm trees in it?' "

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