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Miracle in Barrow

Heart-stopping Whalers victory caps the effort by Julington Creek's Cathy Parker to give the team a field

From Staff | Posted: Sunday, August 19, 2007 ; Updated: 6:18 AM on Sunday, August 19, 2007

The Barrow (Alaska) Whalers football team dove into the Arctic Ocean on Friday night.

Cathy Parker of Julington Creek was getting ready to dive in late Saturday.

Parker's Project Alaska Turf ? a mission to put a state-of-the-art turf football field in landlocked Barrow ? was punctuated with the Whalers' come-from-way-behind 18-16 win over Seward.

It touched off a binge of players diving into the nearby Arctic Ocean, and brought tears from many in the crowd of more than 3,000, an enormous turnout for a community that only has 4,200 residents.

"People were crying, just overwhelmed," said Parker of Julington Creek.

A day later, Parker, 42, was prepping herself mentally for an afternoon plunge.

But following the Whalers' win, Parker's adrenaline was still racing well into Saturday. She probably didn't even feel the cold.

She described the last minutes of the game this way in her blog on [www.staugustine.com](#): "We were losing the game by two touchdowns with three minutes left on the clock. We scored and then did an onside kick and recovered it. With 30 seconds left on the clock, we scored the winning touchdown.

"The media was going crazy. They were all here, NBC, ABC, ESPN, and many newspapers and press from Alaska.

"Larry Csonka was crying by the end of the game. I was being escorted by two police like I was a Super Bowl coach.

"This whole town is still going crazy."

The Whalers' story has been one that's garnered a national audience.

An ESPN feature on the Whalers last year documented how Barrow played its inaugural season, and Parker just couldn't get those images out of her mind.

Because Barrow is so far north, grass doesn't grow there so the team played on a gravel field. Barrow High School only started playing football last year, and in their first game made history by playing the northernmost football game ever.

Still, the team lost all but one of its games last year.

Barrow has a large Inupiat population and the high school has a dropout rate of 50 percent, all of whom are Inupiat.

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Cathy Parker surveys the newly-installed artificial turf football field for the Barrow High School Barrow Whalers football team in Barrow, Alaska, Thursday, Aug. 16, 2007. The 42-year-old bank account executive and football mom from Jacksonville, Fla., spearheaded the effort to place the artificial turf field in the northernmost town in North America. (AP Photo/The Los Angeles Times, Terry Brown)



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The superintendent of schools, Trent Blankenship, who moved there from Wyoming, thought that the district needed to do more to keep students involved in school so that they would stay in school. He did a community survey and the No. 1 response was to start a football team.

He did, and got national attention when ESPN did a documentary on their season. It was that show that caught Cathy Parker's attention.

She prayed, talked to her family and set out on an expedition to raise roughly \$800,000 to put a turf football field in Barrow. Piece by piece, the materials, donated services and money rolled in to Parker's Project Alaska.

She also orchestrated a visit in June to St. Johns County of the Barrow Whalers and their coaches for a training camp at Bartram Trail High School and with the Jacksonville Jaguars.

Parker is no stranger to football. Her husband Carl is the offensive coach at Bartram Trail and her son Kyle is the team's quarterback. He is committed to playing at Clemson next year.

Because of her work to help the Barrow Whalers and to get the artificial turf field, the team dedicated both the field and their season to her.

On Friday, Parker got to see just how much her dream meant to Barrow.

"I met so many people, generations of families," she said. "They've all been so welcoming to us, inviting us into their homes, doing all types of things for us. It's been perfect."

After the game Friday night Parker wrote this on her blog: "It is now 1 a.m. and most of the town, our group from Florida ... are all at a bon fire on the beach celebrating. The Whaler team all jumped into the Arctic after the game and so did the two players from Bartram ...

"This whole town has been forever changed by this act of kindness. They know that it is from God and that they have been blessed.

"I am just so thankful that I could be a part of this wonderful miracle."

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