

## NFL Player Returns to Parkersburg, IA

(ABC 6 NEWS) -- An occurrence causing widespread destruction and distress. A catastrophe. The definition of the word disaster rings all too real for the people of Parkersburg, Iowa, who were hit hard by a deadly tornado three weeks ago.

As the town looks to regroup and rebuild, a familiar face returned to his high school where he dominated on the gridiron. ABC 6 Sports reporter Adam Branstad has more.

Parkersburg, Iowa. A town of nearly 2,000 people. And one natural disaster.

"How bad is it? They said bad. I thought some houses, trees, I've been to some. No, it's...", says Vernon DeVries.

May 25, 2008. A day everybody in the small town will remember. Parkersburg lost six people to the tornado, and two more in nearby New Hartford. While many lives were spared, their homes and possessions weren't.

"I got here a quarter after 5, and I came around that curve, and I couldn't believe it, I just figured we would be picking up a lot of casualties," DeVries says.

"I've been part of this community for 33 years. I've lost both of my homes. My physical home, and also the school, " says Ed Thomas.

Ed Thomas is the head football coach, track coach, and athletic director for Aplington-Parkersburg High School, a place where football is special. Four A-P alumni currently play in the NFL, including Jared DeVries -- a defensive end for the Detroit Lions -- who is back at his school, viewing the disaster for the first time.

"This is unbelievable, undescrivable. I don't know what to feel, I didn't expect this, I really didn't," says Jared DeVries. "I've looked at the Internet, pictures, you come here and you don't recognize anything, it's an eerie feeling you have, it's unbelievable."

DeVries, along with Aaron Kampman, Brad Meester and Casey Wiegmann, all played football right here in Parkersburg. They're four NFL stars with small town values.

"We're so blessed and we have each other, that's a lot to be thankful for," says DeVries.

"They are a huge sense of pride for our community. Whenever they come back, they are the same people when they left, and aren't treated any different. It's just a great thing when they come back, and see what has taken place," says Thomas.

On Fathers' Day, Jared and his dad walked through the town, and saw the damage, saw the destruction, remembering when he walked these hallowed halls.

"The thing I remember most is the journey, not one event, but the journey and just to see everything is unbelievable."

But only three weeks after a disaster, the town is beginning to feel something else: hope.

"They are trying to get on their feet, and I know they will. This town is all about getting to work and I'm sure they will do that," says DeVries.

"I believe we will be a stronger school, a stronger community as a result. I told my players, 'you have an opportunity to go through an experience very few can do. It will make you better people for the rest of your lives'," Thomas says.

Slowly, very slowly, things are getting cleaned up. This week, rubble is expected to be removed from the streets. And for Coach Thomas and DeVries, football is already on their minds.

With all the destruction the tornado caused, one thing remains relatively saved. The football field that produced several NFL players throughout the years remains intact.

"I guarantee Coach Thomas put a lot of work in it. This is his baby, I know the town wants to see the guys on this field on Friday nights," DeVries says.

Coach Thomas assures us of that.

"We've got a great tradition in football, so we will play football in Parkersburg this year, good for the school and the community."

From professional football players, to the people of Parkersburg, everyone helping out in a town that deserves, and expects nothing less. Adam Branstad, ABC 6 Sports.

A-P's first football game is scheduled for September 5th. If you are interested in donating to the Aplington-Parkersburg Athletic Department Relief Fund, they are taking donations.