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Iowa town turns to football to recover from tornado

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PARKERSBURG,
Iowa –

Step-by-step, Jared DeVries walks deeper into the nightmare that is his former high school. Every time his white cross trainers hit the ground, he is greeted by another noise: the crackling of broken glass here and the squish of wet ceiling tiles there.



The Detroit Lions defensive end has read the articles, seen the pictures

A tornado in late May destroyed Aplington-Parkersburg High School and much of this small Iowa town, yet residents are committed to making sure football survives and that the players, and the field, are in shape and ready for play.

and watched the videos. His friends and family warned him about what to expect.

It was a just about four weeks ago, on the evening of May 25, when an EF5 tornado, three-quarters of a mile wide, with winds in excess of 200 mph, ripped through this community of 1,900, destroying or damaging nearly half the town. The tornado, which stayed in Parkersburg for 34 seconds before traveling another 43 miles, killed six people and leveled 21 businesses, the city hall and the heart of the community: Aplington-Parkersburg High School.

DeVries knew his high school was damaged, but not until he showed up here does it hit him. Not until he climbs over the orange "BIOHAZARD" tape, walks through the water-, brick- and glass-covered halls and stands in the doorway of what was once his gymnasium, does it sink in.

The roof is gone and the walls are a crumbled disaster. On the wooden floor where he played so many high school basketball games, where he danced with the blonde girl who would later become his wife, a mangled mess of sheet metal, bricks, I-beams and drywall sits in crisscrossing crumpled piles. In one stack, the tattered corner from a state championship banner flaps in the wind.

And on a nearby wall, a frozen clock reveals the exact time hell arrived, the moment life forever changed for anyone who ever called this place home:

4:56.

"I ... I ... I don't know what to say," DeVries mumbles as he shakes his head. "It's unbelievable. I'm not even sure if it's safe to be here."

It probably isn't, but DeVries keeps walking. He can't help himself. This is where it all started. This is the building -- in the middle of nowhere -- that produced four active NFL players, the fifth-most of any high school in the country.

DeVries, Aaron Kampman of the Packers, Casey Wiegmann of the Broncos and Brad Meester of the Jaguars had always given the credit to Ed Thomas, Aplington-Parkersburg's longtime coach. Thomas taught every boy in this town how to play football, but also how to be a man. Now his life lessons were being put to the test, especially when he asked six of his players to dig the graves for those killed by the storm.

"I constantly tell our kids that they have an opportunity to experience something that very few others have in this world," Thomas says. "And that's to lose everything, to deal with the type of adversity we're dealing with here, but come out stronger on the other side. It is going to make us better people."

DeVries wanders on, turns a corner and heads outside toward the building that used to be the school weight room. But it's gone. Now, there's a pile of debris, a slab of concrete and a squat cage that sits by itself in a field of quickly growing weeds.

On this warm summer afternoon, there are no dogs barking, no kids playing, no lawn mowers buzzing. There are no bouncing basketballs from a neighborhood pickup game or yells of laughter from the local pool. There is only silence. Destruction is the only sight on the horizon.

"My head is all tingly. I just can't process all this," says DeVries, whose parents still live in nearby Aplington, but were unaffected by the storm. "Maybe a tornado takes out a barn or two, maybe a couple farms. But not a town. Not half a town. It's unbelievable ... truly unbelievable. I wish I could bring all of my teammates here so they could see. There's just so much that needs to be done."

With most any other storm, Ed Thomas would have been outside. He's a football coach, after all. Focused, driven, tough and, of course, curious. But on this day, after arriving home from a graduation party at 10 minutes to 5, after seeing the fire trucks race out of town to escape harm's way, he huddled with wife Jan in their basement. They held hands. They covered their heads with pillows. They prayed.



The stopped clock marks the moment -- 4:56 p.m. -- when Parkersburg forever changed.



Detroit Lions defensive end Jared DeVries takes in the devastation at the former gym where he played basketball games.

For 33 years, Thomas has been the head football coach and government/economics teacher at Aplington-Parkersburg High School. In that span, his teams have gone to the playoffs 18 times and played for six state championships, winning two. Only once has his team finished the year with a losing record. But Thomas' effect on the young men in this community goes far behind wins and losses.

The 2005 NFL High School Coach of the Year will have 78 athletes out for football this year and, from the first two-a-day drill, they will forever be family. Each February, Thomas, 57, begins teaching a seven-week leadership course to his seniors. Before the final home game of the season, Thomas gathers his seniors in the end zone and asks each of them to sign a football and share with their classmates what it has meant to be a Falcon. The ball is then buried in the football field that locals call, "The Sacred Acre."

And later, on that day they become fathers, Thomas will send them a notice that their newborn has been drafted to play football for the Falcons.

"I've always said that if I only teach these kids how to play football, I've failed," Thomas says. "The great thing about athletics is all the other things you take with you that make you a better husband, a better Dad, a better citizen. That's what I care about. You handle those things and the wins and losses will take care of themselves."

Though the tornado flattened Thomas' home and tossed his two vehicles like Matchbox cars, he and his wife emerged from the basement that day physically unscathed. But he lost nearly everything else: his home, his cars and worst of all, his school.

Not 30 minutes after the storm passed, he crawled into his classroom to salvage his playbooks, the portraits of the four NFL players that hung on the cafeteria wall and a letter Wiegmann wrote to his fourth-grade teacher, explaining that when he grew up he wanted to play football for the Iowa Hawkeyes and become a pig farmer.

When Thomas made his way to the field, he cried. The scoreboard and press box were crushed like pieces of foil. The goalposts and the fence that surrounded the field were twisted like garbage ties. And the playing surface was littered with glass, nails, branches and thousands of splintered chunks of wood.

"It was like a pin cushion," Thomas says.

The next morning, when it was time to figure out how to rebuild this town and what the priorities would be, it came as no surprise when the mayor, superintendent and principal suggested Falcon football would be near the top of the list.

"Not one single person complained," says Parkersburg Mayor Bob Haylock. "I guess you just have to know Ed Thomas and know what football means to this community. He's going to give us all something to look forward to."

It's a cool, cloud-free summer morning and the sound coming from the old horse barn behind John Tuve's home is unmistakable. There are groans, then barbells crashing into the floor as growling teenagers push their bodies to their physical limits.



Football coach Ed Thomas surveys damage in the school.



The tornado on May 25 stayed on the ground in Parkersburg for 34 seconds. Six people were killed.

Though the clock is barely past 6 a.m. and training camp doesn't start for seven more weeks, the 2008 Aplington-Parkersburg football team already is hard at work. It's what these players know. Tuve spent thousands to cover the facility's sand floor with concrete and the only way the Falcons know how to say thanks is to maximize the opportunity he's given them.

"We know we have to play for our town and for this entire community," Jordan Simon says. "And everyone believes we're going to do just that. We're on a bit of a mission."

Tuve's generosity isn't alone. Power Lift in Jefferson, Iowa, donated most of the equipment. And half the Hawkeyes football team made the trip from Iowa City to help set up the gym.

It's only the beginning. Back in town, towering piles of rubble punch the sky seemingly everywhere. They are filled with everything from a basketball hoop and a boom box, to a crib and a purple pillow with a smiley face on it. But up on the hill in the middle of the town is a sign of hope.

There, in the shadows of the crumbled high school, sits the pristine, perfectly-manicured Sacred Acre. Players, coaches, parents, strangers, busloads of kids from other schools -- they've all spent the past month on their hands and knees, crisscrossing the field, pulling and digging out debris, spreading fertilizer and dropping seed. The same snickering opponents who used to chuckle at the way the Falcons revered this patch of grass are now sweating in the summer heat to make sure it stays that way.

The Iowa State Turf Manager's Association has been by too, donating fertilizer, seed and offering its labor and advice. A Toro distributor in Minnesota donated a top-of-the-line mower and Thomas has spent an hour every other day mowing the field in hopes of promoting growth.

"You don't turn on the television and hear much about how good people are anymore, but I've seen it here in Parkersburg," Thomas says. "I've seen them show up by the busloads to crawl across our field on their hands and knees. I've received checks from people I don't even know. It gets me emotional. All I can do is say, 'Thank you,' but I wish I could do so much more."

The locals realize the priority they are putting football must look strange to outsiders -- how it might be a bit odd that the two best looking patches of grass in this ravaged town are the cemetery and the football field -- but they wouldn't have it any other way.

"It's what the boys need," says Jenee Simon, Jordan's mother. "They might not have their home or their car or their X-Box or any clothes, but they still have each other. They still have football."

For the Falcons to take the field for their home opener Sept. 5, there's a lot of work that still needs to be done: There's a goalpost to erect, a scoreboard, a press box and bleachers to install. The track needs to be stripped and resurfaced. The fence that surrounded the field needs to be replaced too. (The track and the fence alone -- neither of which was covered by insurance -- will cost an estimated \$200,000 to replace.)



Parkersburg is littered with piles of rubble, yet as Thomas shows, the field is clean. Players, coaches, parents, strangers and busloads of kids from other schools have spent the past month digging out debris, spreading fertilizer and seeding the field.

That's why DeVries, Kampman, Meester and Wiegmann have been asking their teammates for donations, especially after they discovered that an NFL charity program would match every player donation up to \$5,000. That's why they will auction autographed memorabilia at a fundraiser this summer in nearby Cedar Falls. That's the reason the Jaguars have been selling AP Falcons tornado relief hats on their Web site.

"This program is about a group of guys who come together, who love to sweat and who have fun working hard," DeVries says. "It's as much about the journey to get there as it is the accomplishments at the end. Coach Thomas honestly cares about the person, not the victory. And you don't find that in athletics anymore.

"We're trying to do everything we can to help out."

This fall, Aplington-Parkersburg will squeeze its classes into the nearby middle school, which the tornado didn't touch.

Demolition of the old high school will begin in a few weeks with construction on a new building, which will sit on the site of the old one, scheduled to begin Aug. 1.

Thomas is unlikely to watch. In the days following the storm, he received a care package from a coach in Firth, Neb., whose school was destroyed in 2004 by an F4 tornado. The coach's advice: Don't watch them tear down your school; it's an image you'll never erase.

So, when the demolition begins in a few weeks, expect the man mowing the football field to look the other way.

Even so, Thomas doesn't plan on erasing all the reminders of what happened that day. In the years to come, when the Falcons face a physical, mental or emotional hurdle, Thomas will no longer have to rely on the stories of his four NFL students. Instead, he will undoubtedly point to the dented, tornado-punched sign that stands just behind the west end zone. It reads, "FALCON COUNTRY."

"I think we're going to keep that as a reminder," Thomas says. "Just to make sure no one forgets."

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John Tuve created a temporary weight room in his barn so the athletes could get back to work in preparation for the upcoming season.