
THE CrossFit JOURNAL

Rebuilding Hackleburg

A deadly tornado decimated Hackleburg, Ala., and one nearby CrossFit affiliate owner aims to help it rebuild.

Andréa Maria Cecil reports.

By Andréa Maria Cecil

May 2012



All images: Shannon Wells

It was a “normal” tornadic storm, Brad Thompson said.

In northern Alabama, such weather events are par for the course.

1 of 4



One of the deadliest tornadoes in American history completely destroyed the town of Hackleburg.

“We get that often here. We get a lot of F1s. No big deal,” he explained.

Those little funnel clouds typically don’t manifest into anything. But around 3 or 4 p.m. on Wed., April 27, 2011, Thompson saw “the clouds moving in the wrong direction, graphically.”

“It was just a nightmare.”
—Hackleburg Councilman
Barry McCarley

“We really didn’t know the full effect until the following day—how devastating it was,” said Thompson, who lives in Florence, Ala.

The Devastation

The next day, not knowing the severity of the damage in Hackleburg, Thompson went about his usual business. He showed up to teach his math class at the University of Northern Alabama in Florence.

One of his students had survived the storm about 40 miles south.

“I said, ‘Was it that bad?’ She just looked at me, blank,” he said. “She said, ‘I’m just kind of in shock. My house is gone.’ About a week after, they found her blanket and some of her pictures in a town about 100 miles away.”

Eighteen people died in the 1,500-person town. The twister ranked among the deadliest tornadoes in American history, according to the National Weather Service. The strongest winds were estimated to be up to 210 miles per hour, the weather service said. The tornado that lasted all of about 30 seconds leveled much of the city. Five days later, the Red Cross declared Hackleburg 75 percent destroyed.

"It was just a nightmare," said Hackleburg Councilman Barry McCarley. "It was like a nuclear war zone or something. Everything was virtually gone in a matter of seconds."

"It's a *Friday Night Lights* kind of town. They don't have a movie theater, they don't have a bar. Their source of entertainment is church and football."

—Brad Thompson

Both his brother-in-law and second cousin died in the twister.

A year later, Hackleburg is still recovering and rebuilding.

"I know enough about a town like that in Alabama because I've lived in them before," Thompson said. "It's a *Friday Night Lights* kind of town. They don't have a movie theater, they don't have a bar. Their source of entertainment is church and football."

There are some bright spots. Hackleburg's largest employer—the Wrangler plant—recently announced it will rebuild its facility larger than before.

"They're busy getting everything together for the municipal function. They're getting the utilities back ...," Thompson said. "But nobody was looking at that source of entertainment as something they needed to be looking at."

Enter Thompson and his affiliate, [CrossFit Shoals](#).

An Idea

His idea: build a community gym.

"The high-school weight room was not much bigger than your bedroom," Thompson said. "So I thought, 'Well, my area is, well, building a gym, so why don't I volunteer a way to make enough money to do that?'"

Thompson received donated land on which to build a 1,500-square-foot gym not only for the high school's use but also for the community's, he said.

"Everything is about the high school," Thompson said. "It'll be bigger and better than what they had."

To raise the money, he has big plans: a nationwide fundraiser.



Even now, a year after the tornado hit, Hackleburg is still in the process of rebuilding.

The soft launch was slated for April 27—the one-year anniversary of the tornado. From there, the effort will last six months, he said.

The goal: \$200,000.

“There’s no way, without livin’ through it, there’s no way to even dream to describe what those people went through.”

—Chuck Rumbley

The workout idea: 30 seconds on, 30 seconds off for each of the people who died in the storm.

“The other thing I thought would be cool ... since we’re honoring the dead, it would be nice to do it silently,” Thompson said.

The goal is to help Hackleburg get back on its feet, said CrossFit Shoals co-owner Chuck Rumbley, who is also president of Hi-Temp Inc., a manufacturer of rubber bumper plates in Tuscumbia, Ala. Rumbley is hoping for support on a national level.



The fundraiser WOD will include a round for each of the 18 people who died in the storm.

“There’s no way, without livin’ through it, there’s no way to even dream to describe what those people went through. ... I couldn’t even tell you what it would have been like to go through. I’m just happy that we didn’t,” Rumbley said.

Thompson emphasized that Hackleburg is far from normal.

“They’re still recovering. The damage is off the charts. We went down to volunteer our backs a few times. And (there are) still people doing it. It’s still being rebuilt,” he said. “They lost everything. Their downtown was completely destroyed.”

Hopefully the gym will encourage other developers and residents to return to Hackleburg to rebuild, McCarley said.

“It’s a good stepping stone. It will help our town, especially our students,” he said. “It’ll be great.”



Courtesy of *Andréa Maria Cecil*

About the Author

Andréa Maria Cecil is the North East Regional Media Director for the 2012 Reebok CrossFit Games. She spent nearly 13 years as a professional journalist, most recently as managing editor of the **Central Penn Business Journal** in Harrisburg, Pa. The 33-year-old is a native of New Orleans who lives in York County, Pa. There, she’s been doing CrossFit since 2008 at **CrossFit York**. Additionally, she dedicates three days a week to training in Olympic weightlifting at **McKenna’s Gym**.