

Former Walton standout Thomas finding comfort in role as Stanford's top linebacker

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While current Stanford standout Chase Thomas enjoys certain aspects of his current West Coast home, there are many things about his former home that he misses.

"I really miss sweet tea and barbecue," said the former Walton standout. "I miss that the most. They don't have sweet tea and barbecue here. Oh, and there's no Chick-fil-A. I miss that too."

However, Thomas has been able to adjust to his new California home and find new interests.

"The biggest difference is that it's 70 degrees here almost year round and low humidity," Thomas said. "I get to go to the beach, which is about 30 minutes away. We can go to Lake Tahoe to go skiing and Los Angeles is not too far of a drive. So, it's really nice out here."

And it keeps getting better for Thomas.

Picking up right where he left off as a defensive force for the Raiders, Thomas heads into his junior season with high aspirations. As a starter in eight of 13 games played as a redshirt freshman in 2009, he completed his sophomore campaign starting all 13 games and ranked

second on the team in tackles (70), including 49 solo, first in tackles for loss (11 for 63 yards) and tied for first in sacks (7). Thomas' sophomore campaign included a 40-12 victory over Virginia Tech in the Orange Bowl and a 12-1 overall record with Stanford.

"We had great success last year," said Thomas, who played weak-side "SAM" linebacker in 2010 in a 3-4 scheme after playing defensive end/linebacker in a 4-3 as a freshman. "The 3-4 defense that was put in really made a difference."

Another factor that has made a difference for Thomas is additional weight that he has put on since high school graduation in '08. When he left the Raiders' program, Thomas weighed about 200 pounds. Now, he's up to 240 with an even quicker first step than he had at Walton.

"It's definitely benefited me," he said of the extra weight and muscle. "I have a lot more power and I don't get pushed around. The extra weight has made me physically stronger. The redshirt process my first year helped me focus on getting bigger. My speed stayed the same, so I don't think I've lost anything.

"I can cover tight ends off the line and backs out of the backfield, so it's all helped. I haven't lost a thing."

Outside linebackers coach Lance Anderson likes what he's seen from Thomas.

"Chase is maturing as a football player," Anderson said in a release. "He is smart, understands the game and has a great football I.Q. He has worked hard in the weight room to become a stronger, more explosive player. He has some great natural pass rushing abilities and a combination of a lot of skill we look for at the outside linebacker position."

Not lost on Thomas is the ever changing landscape of collegiate athletics, which is different every year due to issues such as conference expansion, NCAA infractions, coaches leaving and players graduating or going to the NFL.

Stanford has also had its fair share of changes. Heading into the 2011 season, former Cardinal offensive coordinator David Shaw has taken over the program from former head coach Jim Harbaugh, who resigned to take a coaching job with the NFL's San Francisco 49ers.

One constant Thomas can rely on is having quarterback Andrew Luck back under center. Luck was projected as a 2011 first round NFL draft pick, but he elected to stay in school and

play out his senior season.

"We all saw that Harbaugh would leave sooner or later," Thomas said. "We kind of expected it. I'm glad Andrew decided to stay, though. I've become great friends with Andrew. We came in the same class and a lot of us do the same things together."

Another change for 2011 is the addition of Colorado and Utah to the Pac-10 Conference, which has renamed itself the Pac-12. Thomas can't wait to face the new teams

"I like having the new teams," Thomas said. "I'd like to play every team every year, but having a conference title game is great. Me and the rest of my class came here because we wanted to re-establish Stanford as a national program. We still have something to prove and want to win the Pac-12 championship. I'm looking forward to the season."

When not in season or during his downtime, Thomas enjoys watching movies and the television or listening to music. He also has family in San Francisco that he visits from time to time. A communications major, his collegiate experience has been nothing like what he's heard from other schools.

Widely regarded as the "Harvard of the West," Stanford and its athletes march to a different drum.

"It was a little bit of a humbling experience coming here at first," Thomas said. "At most schools, like in the SEC, football players are like the kings of campus. It's not like that here. It's good to be around people not fawning over sports.

"In fact, freshman year, my roommates were more into making apps for the iPhone than how good the football team was going to be that year. Even though sports isn't on everyone's minds, it's cool to have such great athletes on campus. I think we've won the Director's Cup 17 years in a row. We have Olympic-level athletes training on campus and then you can see them competing in Europe the next week.

"It shows that although we're a tough academic school, we still get some of the best athletes around the country. That says a lot."

Earning first-team All Pac-12 on defense, which is one of Thomas' goals this season, would also say a lot. He would also like to get double digit sacks, earn All-America honors and rank as the top statistical leader at his position.

As a team, the Cardinal was the most improved defensive squad in the nation following the 2010 campaign, finishing 10th nationally in scoring defense, 19th in rushing defense, 15th in sacks, 16th in pass efficiency defense, t-19th in interceptions and 35th in pass defense.

Entering its second season using the 3-4 defense, Stanford is poised to stop even more teams this year, and Thomas will be ready when it happens.

"We had great success with the 3-4 defense that our old coach put in," Thomas said. "We can put up points, and we have a strong defense, so we have the best of both worlds. I'm getting more and more comfortable at outside linebacker and moving faster too. It should be a better transition and smoother than last year."