

Thomas now a vocal captain for Stanford

By John Reid
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Stanford free safety Michael Thomas was bowled over with emotion. With heralded players such as Shayne Skov, Delano Howell and Chase Thomas on the defensive side of the ball, Michael Thomas was as surprised as anyone he was voted captain of the defense.

"I can't lie," said Thomas, who started 11 games in 2010. "I was taken aback a bit. I sit next to Delano Howell in our team meetings. I thought Chase Thomas or he would be our defensive captain. Before I realized they named me captain, both guys got up and shook my hand. With all the guys on the field that look up to them, especially the type of players they are, it's crazy that they have that much respect for me."

"Well deserved," Skov said. "I voted for Michael myself. He will be the emotional leader of the defense this year. Calm, collected and smart guy, but speaks his mind when he needs to. He's the perfect guy to lead the defense."

Thomas, who had three tackles in the Cardinal's 57-3 destruction of San Jose State on Saturday, was thrown into the fire as a true freshman as the team's nickel back. He had an interception against Washington State, adding another pick last year against Cal. It was obvious from the start that the raw athlete from Nimitz High in Houston was going to be an addition of needed speed to a secondary that was maligned in previous years.

When he was at Nimitz, Thomas was the team's quarterback, rushing for 1,000 yards on 109 carries his junior season. He gained 548 more ground yards as a senior. When Thomas arrived at Stanford, then coach Jim Harbaugh turned Thomas into a defender, a smart move.

"You always love to have a guy like Michael Thomas who used to play quarterback," Stanford coach David Shaw said. "He's used to commanding the huddle and commanding respect. He's a natural leader. From the beginning, he gets us lined up and makes the calls. The guys can hear him. He plays and communicates with such passion, it's infectious."

Thomas, third on the team in tackles last year with 61, had his finest game in a 35-0 win over UCLA. Thomas had two forced fumbles and a fumble recovery, taking a fumble to the house 21 yards after stripping Bruins quarterback Kevin Prince of the ball. Thomas was an honorable mention all-Pac-10 pick last season.

"Michael has really great closing speed," Shaw said. "He's really quick. He's not the biggest guy, but he's physical. He likes to get his hands on the receiver and pushes and shoves. Michael gets his hands on a lot of balls and pulls them away. He's an overall nuisance to a receiver."

At Nimitz, Thomas squared off against Stanford's offensive captain, Andrew Luck, who was playing for Stratford. Luck prevailed over Thomas in two of three meetings.

Thomas has admired what he has seen in Stanford's blue chip freshmen, starting in the secondary with Jordan Richardson and Wayne Lyons.

"Those guys are probably the first class since I've been here that have come in ready to play," Thomas said. "They've picked up on the schemes and are flying around. When I saw Wayne Lyons run down the field with Chris Owusu, I said, 'Wow.'"

Thomas noticed during the summer that incoming freshman Ty Montgomery had a wealth of talent.

"Montgomery got the nod from me early this summer as far as running smooth, crisp routes," Thomas said. "He's a strong athlete for a freshman and he plays in a strong manner. He uses his body and hands well. It went from all the young defensive backs guarding him to all the older guys wanting to guard him. It was like, 'Ty's up. Let me get him.' That happened quick."

Thomas has learned a great deal by watching Howell, who delivers quite a belt from his strong safety position.

"Playing with a guy like Delano Howell, that's someone who rarely makes a mistake," Thomas said. "He expects everyone to play up to his level. You see him busting his tail every play, so you say, 'There is no way I can take a play off on him.' He has taught me everything I didn't know when I was moved to safety last year. It's to the point where our communication is non-verbal. I feel like the secondary as a whole has grown together."

The Cardinal went 12-1 last season, coming a long way from the dismal 1-11 in 2006.

"It's not our story that we went from 1-11 to 12-1," Thomas said. "Now it's time for playing Stanford football. We have to play knowing the bull's eye is on our back. We have high expectations for ourselves. We're going to keep approaching every game like we usually do."