

# Thomas making life tough on opponents

By Elliott Almond, Mercury News

It took more than former Stanford coach Jim Harbaugh rolling on the floor with the family dog to get Chase Thomas to commit to the Cardinal.

It took a spin down Palm Drive.

Lesley Thomas knew her son was headed west the moment their rental car turned onto the road designed by famous landscape architect Frederick Law Olmsted. Two days later, Thomas gave a silent commitment contingent on Stanford accepting his application.

"They say if they can get you to take a visit, it's hard to say no -- and they were right," said Thomas, a redshirt junior who anchors the fourth-ranked Cardinal's defense heading into its showdown Saturday against No. 20 USC.

The decision four years ago -- Thomas picked Stanford over Auburn and North Carolina -- could not have worked out better for one of the nation's best outside linebackers. A Marietta, Ga., native with the hankering for Chick-fil-A fast food, Thomas embraced a campus not known for football idolatry.

"You don't get many right calls in life," said Tom Thomas, Chase's father. "What Stanford offers is not the SEC."

Thomas and his teammates, though, play like a Southeastern Conference powerhouse. Just ask Washington, the victim of a 65-21 blowout last weekend in which Thomas had six tackles, 2 1/2 tackles for a loss and one quarterback hit.

This season, Thomas leads the Pac-12 Conference in tackles for a loss (10), is second in sacks with 5 1/2 for minus 52 yards and Advertisement is tied for third with three forced fumbles. He also has 31 tackles to rank third among Stanford defenders.

The Cardinal probably will need Thomas at his best Saturday to help slow down Trojans quarterback Matt Barkley, ranked second to Arizona's Nick Foles in Pac-12 passing at 286.6 yards per game.

How will USC stop Thomas from being effective?

"Well, I don't think anybody has done it yet," Trojans coach Lane Kiffin said Tuesday. "So nothing has worked, really."

Thomas, who goes 6-foot-4 and 240 pounds, dodges blockers as artfully as a boxing champion. Not even the loss of fellow linebacker Shayne Skov to a season-ending knee injury last month and now strong safety Delano Howell to a hand injury has made it easier to stop Thomas.

Marietta Walton High coach Rocky Hidalgo might be one of the few who predicted Thomas' ascent as a quarterback-crunching linebacker. He recalled how college recruiters didn't know what to do with a talented but undersized defensive end. Thomas just didn't fit the SEC mold.

"He wasn't built like them, didn't look like them," Hidalgo said.

Thomas started out as a Cardinal defensive end in 2009, often giving up 100 pounds to opponents. Two years later, he finally has gained needed weight with the help of peanut butter and jelly sandwiches before lunch and after dinner. Too bad the closest Chick-fil-A is 56 miles away in Fairfield.

Now he has power and quickness in his favor. Thomas also learned how to use his hands to keep opponents off him while wrestling at Walton.

"In the NFL, we spent a lot of time teaching guys to use their hands better," said Stanford coach David Shaw, who has been an assistant with the Eagles, Raiders and Ravens. "But Chase is already good at using his hands."

Thomas has found his place in Stanford's 3-4 defensive alignment because it allows him to roam the field. Those who had seen him play lacrosse at Walton understand why the new formation works to his advantage. According to Hidalgo, the Georgia High School Sports Association sent its chief official to all of Walton's lacrosse games to monitor Thomas.

"Chase was just too violent," said Hidalgo, who at the time also coached lacrosse. "He was like no one they had seen around here. They really handcuffed him."

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So Walton coaches let him loose on the football field.

"He's as mean as a snake," Hidalgo added. "He's going to hit you as hard as he can."

As Tom Thomas tells it, Chase found confidence in junior high while training with Tony Villani's XPE Sports in Atlanta, which has since moved to South Florida. Thomas trained with pros such as the Pittsburgh Steelers' Hines Ward.

But Thomas got a late start in high school football after rupturing his spleen in a middle school game. Later that year, he suffered from an unusual lesion of the jaw that forced him to skip his freshman season at Walton.

But once he joined the team, Thomas started on varsity for three seasons. He has been a regular for Stanford since redshirting his freshman year.

His next stop might be the NFL. Shaw would like Thomas to return for a fifth season, but Thomas has been noncommittal. It's a subject his father broaches lightly. Thomas, who expects to graduate in the spring with a degree in communications, is all about winning football games right now.

"If they do," his father said of Stanford, "all the rest will come. If not, then he's got a great education."