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 From the Los Angeles Times

## ROSE BOWL | USC VS. TEXAS

### Tight End Justifies Means

Longhorns' Thomas finally gets the ball, and when he doesn't get it, he's still knocking people down

By Peter Yoon

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For as far back as David Thomas can remember, all he ever wanted was the ball.

He's not having any problems getting it now. The tight end for Texas leads the Longhorns in receptions with 40.

But as a child, when Thomas played soccer, his desire for the ball was a problem. He often got bored when the ball didn't come his way so he'd run and tackle the player who had it and then dribble off until the referee called a foul.

"I'd just go knock the kid down and take it," Thomas said. "The ref always told me to stop doing that, my dad always told me to stop, I just wanted to kick the ball around and I couldn't get to it so I knocked them down."

These days, the ball finds him.

Thomas, a senior three-year starter, holds Longhorn career records for a tight end with 88 receptions, 1,279 receiving yards and 15 touchdowns.

This season, he set a school receptions record for a tight end, and his 525 yards and five touchdowns are No. 3 on the Longhorns' all-time single-season list.

Thomas refers to himself as "just a guy who moves the chains," but his numbers say he isn't a typical possession tight end used for short-yardage gains. He has become a key cog for an offense that averages a nation-leading 50.9 points a game.

Thomas has averaged 13.1 yards a catch this season and 14.5 for his career. His 15 career touchdowns have averaged 21.6 yards. An All-Big 12 selection, Thomas is also a fine blocker, who averaged 13 "knockdowns" — blocking an opponent to the ground — a game.

"He's a different breed of a tight end," Texas quarterback Vince Young said. "David Thomas doesn't stop till the whistle blows. He's just an athlete, man. You know David Thomas will get you out of anything."

Thomas was born in Plainview, Texas and attended high school in Wolfforth. Those are suburbs of Lubbock, home of Texas Tech, which is one of the Longhorns' most hated rivals.

He can't quite pinpoint why, but Thomas said even growing up in "Tech country" he was always a Longhorn fan.

"I look at pictures of me when I was a little kid, I always had Texas stuff on," he said. "It wasn't Tech, it wasn't Oklahoma, it wasn't LSU. It was Texas."

That, he said, is what led him to become a Longhorn — a point of consternation in his hometown, which he visits wearing burnt orange.

"I'm the enemy a little bit," he said. "There were people kind of upset that I wasn't going to stay in my hometown. There are always people that have to be smart alecks and heckle me a little bit, but it hasn't been too bad. I think my parents have it worse because they're there all the time."

Having a tight end as the leading receiver on a team averaging more than 50 points a game is unusual, but it's not as if Texas doesn't have plenty of speedy receivers. Indeed, they help Thomas because offensive coordinator Greg Davis likes to send them deep to stretch the defense, opening up higher-percentage passes to Thomas.

"He's fast and he's got great hands," said USC strong safety Darnell Bing, who will spend much of the Rose Bowl watching Thomas. "I'll be on him

a little bit more than I've been on any other tight end. My job is to stay on him and make sure he doesn't catch those balls."

Thomas is humbled by his role in the high-powered Texas offense and said his statistics are merely a product of the options available in the passing game. Billy Pittman, Limas Sweed and Ramonce Taylor have 25 or more receptions each. Pittman and Sweed have five touchdown catches each, tied with Thomas for the team lead.

"It just shows how diverse our wideouts are, how many guys we have in our wideout group that are capable of making plays," Thomas said. "Those guys all rotate whereas I'm out there pretty much the whole time."

Thomas, at 6 feet 4 and 240 pounds, doesn't have the size of many top tight end prospects and with a 4.8-second 40-yard dash time, he isn't among the fastest. Still, he projects as a mid-round NFL draft pick according to several draft projection services, because he has a firm grasp on fundamentals.

What he lacks in physical skills, he more than makes up for in smarts. An Academic All-Big 12 selection for two consecutive years, Thomas was a finalist for the Wuerffel Award for the college football player who best combines exemplary community service with athletic and academic achievement and was a semifinalist for the Draddy Trophy, considered the "Academic Heisman."

"For all that he brings to the team with football skills, he doubles that with his character," Young said. "The dude is just solid all the way around, there's no other way to say it. There's nothing he can't do."

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