



Lubbock transplant anchored in Austin as UT tight end

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AUSTIN — In all of his 22 years on Earth, Texas tight end David Thomas has done all sorts of things to a tortilla.

He's buttered them and bitten them, flipped them and folded them, filled them with beef and called them a taco.

But thrown one?

"I can't say I've ever done that," said Thomas, the Longhorns' senior All-America candidate. "I've been hit with quite a few, though."

It's an odd admission for a guy who grew up attending games at Texas Tech's Jones Stadium, where tortilla tossing is a time-honored tradition.

Thomas was raised in the Lubbock suburb of Wolfforth, a short post route from the Tech campus. Thomas, unlike other kids in the neighborhood, was raised a rabid UT fan.

When No. 10 Tech comes to Austin to face the No. 2 Longhorns in a bigger-than-big Saturday showdown, the game will be about more than just control of the Big 12 South.

For Thomas, it's about the right to go home again.

"My friends back home all say they're rooting for us," Thomas said. "They're probably just saying that."

Thomas has always been a little off in his Longhorns-loathing neck of the woods.

As a kid, he would wear burnt orange to Red Raiders games, and flash the "Hook 'em" sign when everyone else was doing "Guns Up."

Thomas' father, John, remembers the year his son dressed up as a UT football player for Halloween.

"That's probably a pretty appropriate costume for this area," John Thomas chuckled.

Thomas can still recall his first trip to Jones Stadium as a UT player in 2002.

He was a freshman then, and hadn't played much. That didn't stop him from being greeted with a barrage of epithets as he trotted out of the tunnel for the first time.

To the Tech faithful, Thomas was a turncoat.

"I was just surprised they knew who I was," Thomas said. "I was a freshman. I hadn't done anything."

Since then, Thomas' profile has raised considerably.

A consensus All-Big 12 pick last year, Thomas has spent most of this season chasing UT's tight-end records.

His 12 career touchdowns tie him with Pat Fitzgerald for most in school history for a tight end. With 11 more receptions and 103 more yards, he can match Fitzgerald atop the all-time lists in those categories as well.

"I don't know if we've had a player who is as consistent," UT coach Mack Brown said. "He's the same every play."

To quarterback Vince Young, that makes Thomas a fairly steady security blanket.

Thomas has again played that role to perfection this year, catching a team-best 21 passes.

"You always know he's going to be open," said Young, who connected with Thomas five times in last week's victory over Colorado. "You keep your eye on that guy."

The Red Raiders have learned as much the hard way.

Thomas' 9-yard TD catch in the second quarter of last year's game in Lubbock helped ignite a 51-21 UT victory.

Still, Thomas says he will always have a soft spot in his heart for the Red Raiders. After all, they were the first to offer him a scholarship during the 2001-02 recruiting season.

Ever the out-of-place Orangeblood, he chose to wait on the Longhorns instead.

He's glad he did — even if it might have cost him an extra 50 catches a year in Tech's pass-crazy offense.

"I'm enjoying my time here," Thomas said. "I'd rather win a lot of games than catch a lot of balls."

Or toss a bunch of tortillas.

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