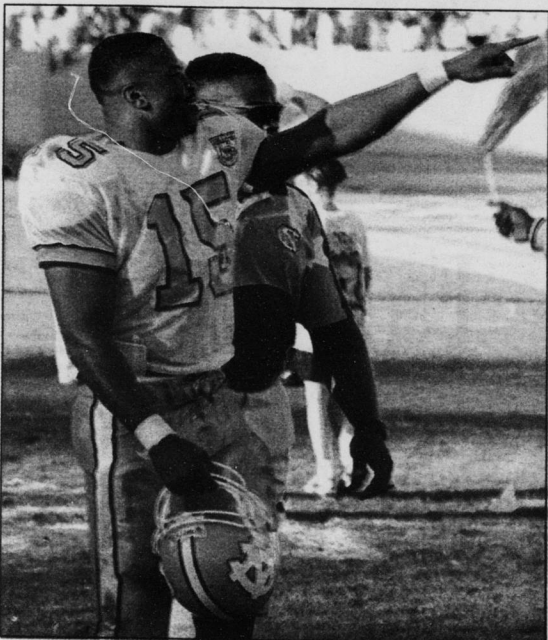


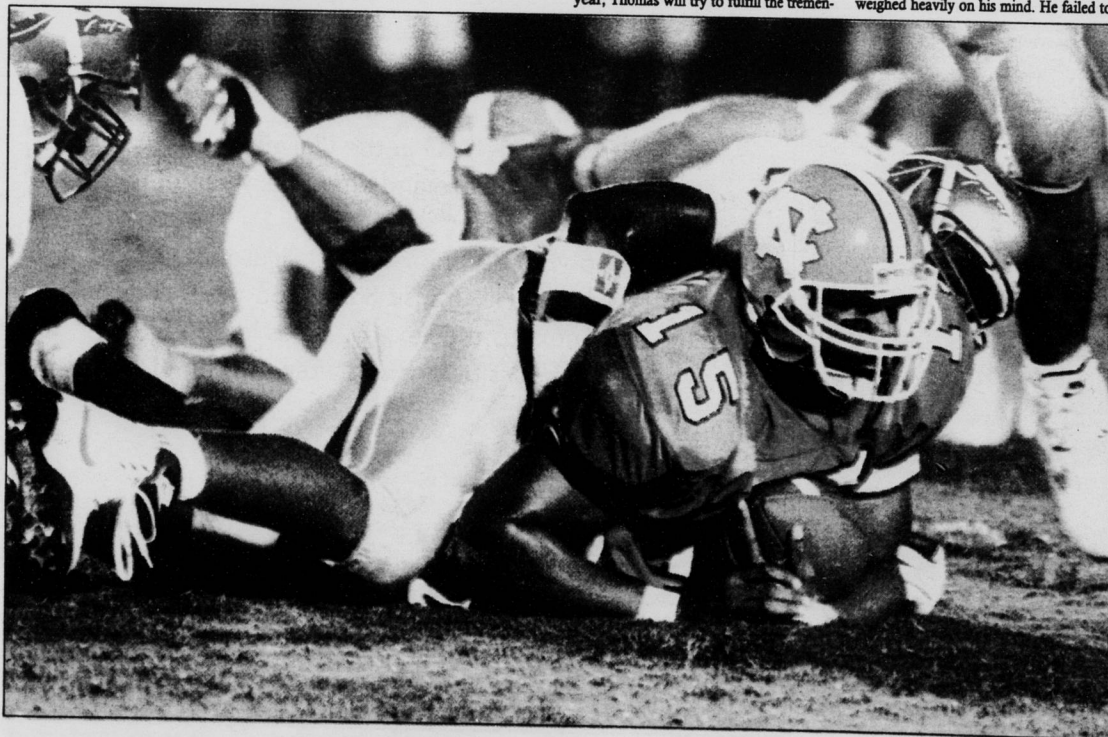
In his four years at UNC, Mike Thomas has seen it all: injuries, quarterback controversy, a bowl victory and bench time. But finally, there is no question, Mike Thomas is...

King of



ABOVE: Thomas walks off the field after leading UNC to a dramatic 41-40 victory over Duke last year. He threw two 66-yard-plus touchdowns to Octavus Barnes in 1994. **BELOW:** Thomas had a rough 1993 season, enduring two injuries and losing the starting job to Jason Stanicek.

DTM FILE PHOTOS



BY JUSTIN SCHEEF
SENIOR WRITER

It's really easy to be a nay-sayer. Mike Thomas has heard all the doubters, the critics, all the people who wanted to bring him down. As soon as he left high school, he heard them.

Sports Illustrated took one of the first jabs at Thomas, just months after he had graduated from Richmond County High School. SI's 1990 college preview said, "Thomas ... may never climb Chapel Hill."

Five years later, not only is Mike Thomas on top, he is king of the Hill.

Believe it or not, the Hamlet native's five-year odyssey from Richmond County standout to UNC's starting quarterback has finally reached its pinnacle. And what an odyssey it has been for the 23-year-old.

He failed to qualify academically and attended Fork Union Military Academy in Virginia in 1990-91. He was injured three times, once in his freshman year in 1991 and twice in 1993. And he dealt with a quarterback controversy in which Coach Mack Brown kept everyone guessing who would start each week.

At any point during this odyssey, Thomas could have quit. He could have transferred. He could have become a full-time baseball player, as he was already playing professionally during the summers. But Thomas elected to stay in Chapel Hill. And now he hopes it pays off this year.

"Mike is the type of person who is willing to compete in any situation," said Gerald Carr, the former UNC quarterbacks coach who now handles the Philadelphia Eagles' wide receivers. "He is a good model of persistency. When you're persistent and you keep trying, then eventually it's yours."

And the 1995 Tar Heels are his team. This year, Thomas will try to fulfill the tremen-

dous expectations that were put on him when he arrived at North Carolina.

One of N.C.'s Greatest

When compiling a list of North Carolina's best high school quarterbacks in the past several years, a few names come to mind — Heath Shuler, Donnie Davis and Trot Nixon.

Mike Thomas deserves to be alongside those names, perhaps even at the top of the list. He was the state player of the year twice, leading Richmond County to a three-year 40-3 record and back-to-back 15-0 seasons, in 1988 and 1989. His name appeared on every All-America list, both as a quarterback and a punter.

No wonder Brown, whose career record at UNC was 2-20 when he recruited Thomas, was interested in his services.

USA Today featured Thomas in 1989, touting his national punting prowess. At one point during his senior year, Thomas led all punters at any level with a 49.6 average.

As the team's quarterback, Thomas dominated as well, often throwing TDs to future UNC teammate Oscar Sturgis, then a tight end. Thomas passed for 1,451 yards and 20 TDs in his senior year.

"Look at our scores: 51-12, 57-9, 57-7, 61-0, 55-20," Richmond County coach Daryl Barnes told USA Today. "You can't leave a kid in when those are the scores."

Barnes, now the principal at North Asheboro Middle School, said Thomas' ability to persevere through adversity was evident even in high school.

"I can remember a night when Mike was a junior, when his mother was having some pretty serious surgery in the hospital, and Mike elected to play football," Barnes said. "He had an unbelievable game that night despite all that stuff on his mind."

Thomas' academic difficulties also weighed heavily on his mind. He failed to

get the required 700 on his SAT in numerous attempts and thus attended Fork Union before arriving at UNC in the fall of 1991.

When Thomas finally strode on campus, the program was in transition, on the verge of moving to the next level — a bowl trip.

An Aborted Freshman Season

Thomas was supposed to succeed the quarterback duo Brown implemented in 1990 and 1991 — Chuckie Burnette and Todd Burnette. Added to the mix was a gawky-looking kid from Illinois — freshman quarterback Jason Stanicek.

The plan that year was to redshirt Stanicek, who would later go on to break Charlie Justice's UNC record for total offense, and play Thomas when needed, because he was a year older.

Thomas did play in two games, seeing spot action in Cincinnati and William & Mary blowouts. But in his eighth play against the Tribe, Thomas was sacked from the blind side and fumbled. The result: a torn ligament in his right thumb and a season-ending injury. He sat out the rest of the year and qualified for a medical redshirt.

When the Burnette(s) duo went down with injuries later that year, Brown inserted Stanicek in the final four games.

"We felt for the future of our program, we needed to get a young freshman ready," Brown said after Stanicek's first game. "We felt like with four weeks left, if (Stanicek) could handle it emotionally, we felt like we needed to go ahead and play Jason so he and Mike wouldn't be in the same class."

Stanicek handled it well. He won three of four and saved UNC's season, almost gaining a bowl bid. Those last four games set up a quarterback controversy that wouldn't end until Stanicek finished his career last season.

Mack's QB Roulette Wheel

As the 1992 season opened, Brown wouldn't reveal his plans for the starting quarterback position.

"We'll play one of them on the first series," Brown said that preseason. "If they score, then we'll let them go out there and do it again. If they score again, then we'll let them do it again. But if he struggles, then we're going to have to put the other one in the game."

And that's how it went all season. Brown went with the hot hand, playing both QBs throughout the season. Thomas started only three regular-season games — in wins vs. Furman, Georgia Tech and Maryland — as well as going the distance in a 21-17 victory over Mississippi State in the Peach Bowl, Brown's first bowl game as UNC's coach.

Thomas' best game that year was a 299-yard performance off the bench against Duke, a game won by UNC 31-28. He hit Bucky Brooks for two TD passes, including the game winner in the final two minutes.

Of course, for every game that Thomas was the hero, there were also games where he stood and watched. Against N.C. State and Florida State — two of the biggest games of that year — Thomas saw no action at quarterback; coach's decision.

Those times tried Thomas. "The quarterback situation" helped me build more character," Thomas said. "I learned from that. I could have gone the other way, I could have transferred or quit playing football, but that's not me."

"It was something I had to live with and play through and have faith in God. He wasn't going to let me make a bad decision."

Thomas' patience was rewarded in the Peach Bowl, and he seemed set to challenge Stanicek again for the QB job. That was