

of the Hill



DTH FILE PHOTO

Unfulfilled Expectations?

Mike Thomas' Career Passing Statistics

Year	Comp	Att	Yds	INT	Pct	TD	LP
1991	4	7	50	0	.571	0	22
1992	54	114	831	4	.474	3	47
1993	20	37	336	2	.541	1	49
1994	39	83	715	3	.470	8	71
Totals	117	241	1932	9	.485	12	71

before the second injury.

A Year of Frustration

In the spring after the bowl game, Thomas tore his left pectoralis muscle while lifting weights. He missed all of spring practice and did not play baseball that summer after having surgery March 3.

More adversity for Thomas to overcome. "I was looking forward to a lot of things in the future, and then I had the injury," Thomas said. "It was a big setback for me, because I had never had that type of injury. It was something I had to deal with and fight through."

Thomas spent that spring and summer rehabilitating, and when fall practice started, the quarterback controversy continued. Who would start?

Brown hinted he would go with Thomas in the season opener against Southern Cal, but Stanicek started that game and the next four. Thomas finally got his chance at N.C. State, after Stanicek injured his shoulder the previous week against Florida State.

But Thomas was sacked early, bruising his ribs. Stanicek came off the bench and led UNC to its first win against the Wolfpack in six years. Thomas missed the UTEP game

the next week and made only 14 pass attempts in the last five games.

"I slipped on the turf and somebody fell on me—I was in an awkward position, like a hurdler's position," Thomas said in November. "It hurt to pass, I couldn't run the option, I couldn't punt. It was frustrating."

'Frustrating' was Thomas' word that fall. His team was winning, headed to the Gator Bowl, and he was practically a nonfactor.

From Bench Warmer to Hero

Stanicek continued to rack up UNC record numbers as Thomas sat into the '94 season. But when Stanicek bruised his ribs late in the second quarter at SMU, Brown once again turned to Thomas, who was waiting patiently on the sidelines.

The junior responded with two touchdown passes, including a 66-yard crossing route to freshman Octavus Barnes that brought UNC from behind for the win.

"There was no panic there," Thomas said that day. "I've been under situations before—and some of the guys back in '92—we've been under pressures before. ... We needed to face the adversity and come back to win."

The next week, Stanicek started against Georgia Tech and broke Justice's record.

But Stanicek, a master at the option, was getting battered, and Thomas relieved Stanicek for good in the Clemson loss. After passing for 177 yards that day, Thomas started the final two games and the Sun Bowl against Texas.

"I knew Jason was taking a beating in the middle of the season," Thomas said. "I was hoping to come in and relieve him some. Things didn't go the way I wanted, but when I came in, I just wanted to do my job and put points on the board and put us in a position to win ballgames."

In the final three games, Thomas passed for 196, 210 and 298 yards, against Wake Forest, Duke and Texas, respectively. He threw six TDs, including a 71-yarder to Barnes. Thomas was bombing away.

"That opens up a different avenue for us, with Mike having a stronger arm," Wall said. "That definitely makes a receiver, when it's his turn to run a deep or a post route, get excited and think, 'It could be coming to me this time.' So that opens up a different avenue in our game plan."

Ready to Air It Out

Brown contends that the game plan does not change with Thomas at the helm, but UNC is more pass-oriented and less option-oriented under Thomas. In the five games in which Thomas was a factor, UNC averaged 243 passing yards. In the other seven games, the Tar Heels averaged 153 yards.

"Offensively, Mike Thomas gives us the ability to spread the ball around the field and throw the ball deep, and continue to run the option, so we feel we've got some good combinations of things," Brown said.

Thomas said: "We'll just use everybody. Share the wealth, that's how I see it happening. Share the wealth and put it in the zone any time we get a chance."

If Thomas does that, he will continue to fulfill the great expectations placed on him and add another chapter to his idiosyncratic career.

"Mike's been through a lot, no doubt," said Barnes, his high school coach. "People have tried to drag him down all throughout his career. That's what's angered me so much."

Carr said those doubters have had no effect on the thick-skinned Thomas.

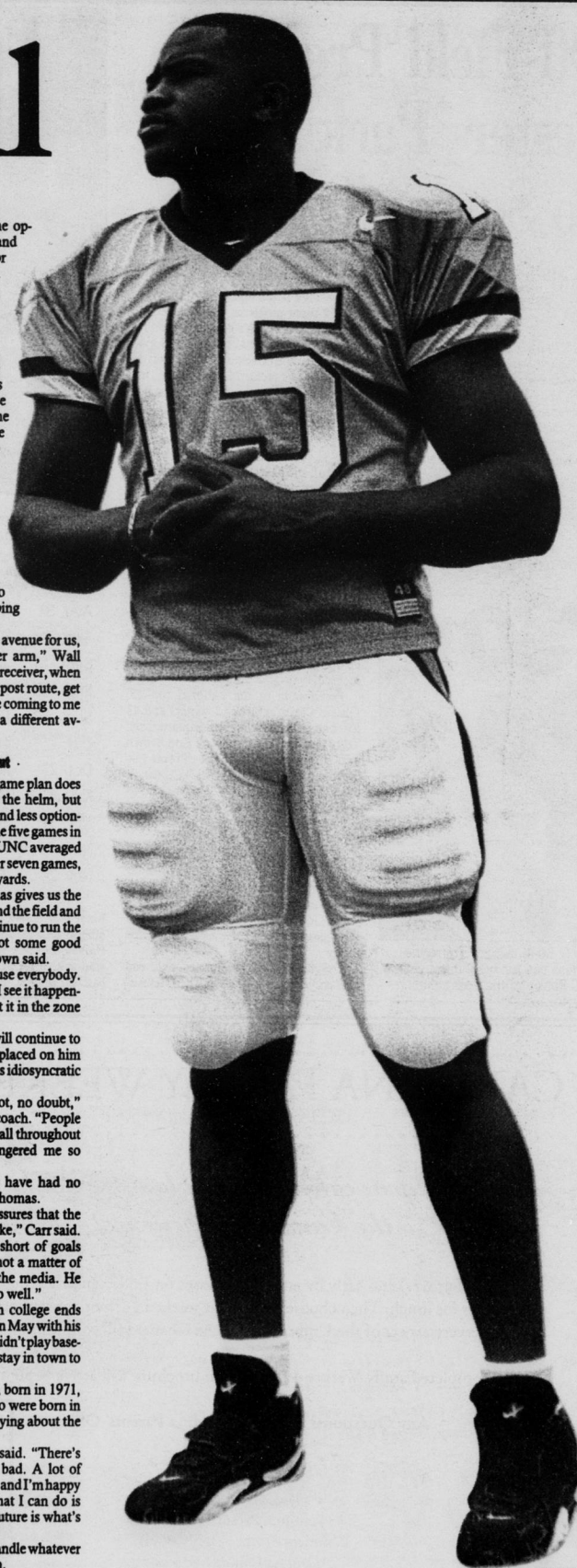
"Those things are the pressures that the fans and the media put on Mike," Carr said. "The demands are nothing short of goals that he sets for himself. It's not a matter of pressure from the fans and the media. He just feels like he's going to do well."

Thomas' odyssey through college ends this year, when he graduates in May with his communications degree. He didn't play baseball this summer, electing to stay in town to prepare for this final year.

Now he is a senior leader, born in 1971, on a team with freshmen who were born in 1977. But Thomas isn't worrying about the past five years.

"It's gone by quick," he said. "There's been some good and some bad. A lot of memories. But it's been good, and I'm happy to be here. The only thing that I can do is handle the present, and the future is what's ahead of me."

No doubt he'll be able to handle whatever adversities are thrown at him.



DTH/JOHN WHITE