

More challenges ahead for Thomas and the Tigers



Facing The Challenge

In addition to playing their OVC schedule, TSU Head Coach Bill Thomas says the Tigers will maintain their traditional rivalries with Florida A&M, Grambling, Jackson State and Southern (photo by Craig T. Greenlee).

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Difficult challenges continue to confront Bill Thomas, head football coach and athletic director at Tennessee State.

He has apparently gotten past his first major hurdle in gaining the respect of Big Blue followers. Thomas took over for the legendary Big John Merritt, who died in 1983.

In three seasons, under three different presidents and three different athletic directors, he has quieted the nay-sayers. He's 28-6-1 as the Tigers' head coach. Detractors have had to zip their lips.

On another front, he's facing a very formidable test as athletic director, a position he accepted last November. Thomas has the Herculean task of maintaining a winning athletic program in the face of dwindling funds and recruiting from an increasingly shrinking crop of quality athletes who can handle college academics.

And because TSU will be a full-fledged member of the football-crazy Ohio Valley Conference in 1988, Thomas is working to ensure that the Tigers will stay winners. It's very likely that Tennessee State may be the only black college to belong to a conference composed of predominantly white schools. Tapping additional sources of revenue will be the key for Tennessee State's surviving in the OVC, Thomas says.

A tough mission? Certainly. "Yes," Thomas says, "there is great pressure to produce additional revenues, and that will be a tough challenge. But it's a challenge that can be met."

Two areas are of prime concern to Thomas when you ask him about generating funds -- gate receipts and financial contributions from boosters and interested parties.

Don't misunderstand. Tennessee State has done quite well at the ticket windows. The school is ranked third nationally in attendance among Division 1-AA colleges. They also have the winningest 1-AA football program, boasting a 79.2 winning percentage on the all-time listings.

But that doesn't go far enough, Thomas says. TSU gets a hefty income from certain games on their schedule, but that has more to do with who they play. They'll sell out against Southern or Grambling. But when it comes to other schools in the OVC (such as Youngstown State or Murray State), fans don't turn out in sufficient numbers to make dent on how much income TSU athletics generates.

"We have to increase our attendance numbers past the two or three big games we have that people are always going to come see," Thomas says. "That means getting more fans to those games and also to our away games."

While the Tigers belong to the OVC, they won't abandon black college teams

that have become traditional foes. "We'll play our conference schedule," Thomas says, "but we will keep our traditional rivalries with Florida A&M, Grambling, Southern and Jackson State."

Another area that may be even more critical than gate receipts is contributions from alumni and other organizations, he continues.

The more successful black college football programs do very well at the gate. But when you look at contributions and fund-raising, the picture isn't quite as alluring.

White schools in Division 1-AA, Thomas says, don't draw that well at the gate. But they compensate by garnering enough funds through private sources to more than make up the difference.

If black colleges like TSU are to continue to be competitive athletically, funds must be available to make things happen, Thomas says.

"There has to be a change in attitude," he says. "For a program to prosper, people must put in their fair share. And that means former athletes of the school, administrators, alumni. Without that kind of financial support, we're looking at some rocky roads ahead. And what I mean is either gifts-in-kind or financial donations."

The 39-year-old Thomas is not unaccustomed to tackling the uncertain. He uses his linebacker philosophy to make the best of an unfavorable situation.

Before he was handed the reins of TSU football, Merritt had fashioned the program into the major happening in Nashville for 21 years. Losing was, and still is, a cardinal sin. With gifted passers like Eldridge Dickery, "Jefferson Street" Joe Gilliam; Joe "747" Adams and Gilbert "The Rifle" Renfroe, the Tigers never had a losing season under Merritt. In six of those seasons, TSU was unbeaten, and in 12 other campaigns, they never lost more than two games. Merritt's 238-67-11 coaching record placed him among the top 10 winningest coaches in college football history.

To add more fuel to the fires of controversy on Thomas' hiring as head coach, Merritt's longtime and trusted assistant, Joe Gilliam Sr., was overlooked as the successor.

Gilliam Sr. is the father of "Jefferson Street Joe," who starred at TSU from '68 to '71 and won 33 games as quarterback. Gilliam Jr. later played for the Pittsburgh Steelers and made instrumental contributions when they won the Super Bowl in 1975.

For three years before to Merritt's death, Gilliam Sr. was the interim head coach and guided the Tigers to a 24-4-2 showing. In almost everyone's mind, he was the logical replacement.

So when Thomas was hired, the voices of dissent made their feelings known. Sure, Thomas knew the program, having been an

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