

THIGPEN

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This time he received a hero's welcome. Thigpen, WSSU's most visible and wealthy alumnus, arrived in a stretch limousine and was given celebrity status by the 500 or so fans in attendance at the game.

In an exclusive interview with *The Chronicle*, Thigpen said although he doesn't plan to let the size of his contract change him, it does serve as a form of validation.

"It is a statement," he said. "In this league (NFL), you get respect by the amount of money you make. That's why you play the game."

Coming from a small historically black college, Thigpen said he's had to prove himself in the professional ranks. A for-

mer fourth round draft choice of the San Diego Chargers in 1991, Thigpen said it hasn't been easy getting to where he is today.

"A lot of guys coming out of college are given a better chance of making it," he said. "Guys from schools like Tennessee, Oklahoma, Nebraska, Colorado, they're not better than you are but they are able to get good contracts when they step into the league."

"I had to earn respect. I had to go out and prove myself everyday and every game."

Early in his career, Thigpen fought an uphill battle. After an up and down rookie season, he was cut during his second year with the team.

Thigpen's mother, Minnie Thigpen, who was in attendance at the celebrity basketball game on Saturday, said the

entire family was there for the budding star during his early years.

"I can remember when he got cut from San Diego," she said. "He said 'mom I need you to pick me up at the airport. Bring the van because I'm going to be bringing all of my things'."

"I knew it hurt him, but he had confidence that he could make it in the pros," Mrs. Thigpen said. "He always had that kind of confidence."

"He came home for about three weeks before he got a call from Pittsburgh."

CHARLES BAILEY, a former WSSU coach, who worked for the Steelers as the team's director of player personnel, was aware of Thigpen's ability and was responsible for the team signing him.

THIGPEN IMPRESSED the team in drills and was signed for the remainder of the season. The following year, he began to work his way into the starting lineup.

Also around that time, an incident happened to him that changed his life. While driving through a neighborhood in Pittsburgh, he was carjacked at gunpoint. He thought he'd never live to play another football game.

The ordeal made him take life more seriously.

"Basically, it was an incident that made me realize you have to live for today," he said. "There's no guarantee you're going to have another chance to do anything. It helped me focus on getting things done."

It showed in his on-the-field performance. During the 1995 season, he led the team in receptions and totaled more than 1,000 yards receiving. Thigpen duplicated that feat in 1996, when he was named to the Pro-Bowl team. This past season he was named All-Pro.

When his contract expired at the end of the season, he began to shop his services around the league. He found out that he was a very marketable commodity.

"When I went to visit the Oilers, I was very impressed with what they had to say," Thigpen said. "They said I was No. 1 on their list of free agents and that got my attention. The coach said he was tired of me beating them because of the success I had enjoyed against them."

Thigpen was also impressed with the Oilers.

"They are very similar to the offense we had in Pittsburgh," he said. "Their quarterback (Steve McNair) and running back (Eddie George) are to their offense what Cordell (Stewart) and Jerome (Bettis) are to Pittsburgh."

Of course, the money was also a major consideration.

"This gives me a little more financial security," said Thigpen, who now makes his home in Charlotte. "But this is not just for me, it's for my family. I'm in the process of buying my mother a home and whatever else she wants. I can also do some things for my brothers and sisters."

FAMILY HAS ALWAYS been important to Thigpen, the youngest of six children born to Eddie and Minnie Thigpen. The family has remained close through the years, even after Thigpen's parents separated during his teenage years.

"We tried to be good parents and show him proper leadership when he was growing up," Mr. Thigpen said. "All of the kids stayed close to each other. With him being the youngest, we all supported him in everything, including sports."

Although Thigpen lived with his mother, his father was supportive during his career at WSSU. So were his brothers and sisters.

Keith Graham, Thigpen's brother, said everyone pitched in to help support their younger sibling during his college years.

"We all have our individual careers, but we're still close," he said. "I can remember pitching in to help Yancey get his apartment set up during his college days. I was just starting my career as an officer in the air force, but I was there to help out."

It was like that for all of the family members.

These days, things have turned around. All of the other members of the family are reaping benefits of their baby brother's athletic success.

The entire family doesn't get a chance



Yancy Thigpen accepts a plaque with his parents, Eddie and Minnie Thigpen at his side.

to see each other often. When they do it's usually at a football game. Four of the six were at the game on Saturday. A brother, who lives in Milwaukee, and a sister, who lives in Germany, were unable to attend.

The last time all of them were together was at the Pro-Bowl, early last month.

"It was really nice," Mrs. Thigpen said. "He flew everyone there and we all had a great time."

NOW THAT HE'S MADE IT to the top of his profession, Thigpen said he'd like to give something back to the communities that helped him get where he is today.

They include Winston-Salem and WSSU. That's what brought him back to the campus last Saturday. He brought a group called Thigpen's Celebrity All-Stars

"In this league (NFL), you get respect by the amount of money you make. That's why you play the game."

-Yancy Thigpen



Coach "Bighouse" Gaines awarded Thigpen for his accomplishments at WSSU and in the NFL.



Thigpen stops to share a moment with Yvonne Schneider, a member of WSSU's administrative staff.



Thigpen brought several former WSSU athletes with him, including Connell Maynor (L) and Richard Huntley (C).

to the campus to raise money for the Boys and Girls Club. The group included professional football players, including Eric Green, of the Baltimore Ravens, Dennis Johnson, of the Oakland Raiders, Ernie Mills, formerly of the Panthers, Andre Royal, of the Panthers, Rae Carruth, of the Panthers, and Fred Lane, of the Panthers.

"I want to give something back," he said. "In the past, I was just concentrating on getting my career established and getting to the top of the game. I have the resources to look at doing some things for kids and my school."

"Now that I've arrived, I'm going to be actively involved."



Thigpen's arrival on the WSSU campus in a stretch limousine.



Keith Graham (R), Thigpen's older brother, said his mother's steady influence resulted in a close-knit family.