

New contract nets Thigpen respect - and much money

Right now is the best of times for Yancey Thigpen.

Thigpen recently signed a deal with the Houston Oilers that made him the highest paid wide receiver in the NFL.

He agreed to a record-breaking \$21.5 million contract with the Oilers that included a \$5.5 million signing bonus.

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

But only a few short seasons ago, things didn't look so bright for the former CIAA standout receiver, who played at Winston-Salem State.

Perhaps that is why Thigpen isn't taking anything for granted. He knows how difficult it has been for him to climb to the top.

"A lot of guys coming out of college are given a better chance of making it," he said. "Guys from

run-oriented offense, he finished his collegiate career with 85 receptions for 1,816 yards and 21 touchdowns.

A fourth-round draft pick in 1991, he spent the first three weeks on the practice squad. He was activated for the fourth game and then placed on the practice squad until the final three games of the season.

He was cut just before the start of the 1992 season.

Charles Bailey, a former WSSU coach, who currently serves as the Steelers' director of player personnel, was aware of Thigpen's ability and was responsible for the team signing him.

"I had scouted him his senior season," Bailey said. "I had looked at him for our organization and kept up with him during his time with San Diego." Really, I was amazed that they cut him. I knew his potential."

But things just didn't seem to fall in place for Thigpen in San Diego.

"He had a couple of nagging injuries," Bailey said. "They (San Diego) needed a receiver right then, so they cut him to make room for a starter."

Bailey called Thigpen and invited him in for a workout.

"I told him that if he did well - if he came in and had an excellent workout - we could sign him."

During Thigpen's workout, several former black college players, including WSSU's Donald Evans, who was with the Steelers at the time, showed up to cheer him on.

"I brought the video in of workout and I was impressed," Bailey said. "I took it to general manager and he told me if he was good enough, go ahead and sign him."

The rest is history. Thigpen slowly worked his way into the lineup

and turned heads when he finally got his chance to start.

He played the final 12 games of the '92 season as special team player and had one reception for two yards. He continued to play mostly on special teams during the '93 season, hauling in nine passes for 154 yards and three touchdowns.

During that time, another event happened in his life that changed the focus of his life.

He was carjacked at gunpoint, while driving through a neighborhood in Pittsburgh. At that moment, 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," Thigpen said. "There's no guarantee you're going to have another chance to do anything. It helped me focus on getting things done."

He began to come into his own during the following season, when he moved into the Steelers' starting lineup. Thigpen caught 36 passes for 546 yards and four touchdowns.

The next season ('95), he made it to the Pro Bowl after catching a team-record 85 passes for 1,307 yards. Injuries forced Thigpen to miss most of the '96 season. He played in only six games and had 12 receptions for 244 yards and two scores.

Last season, however, he bounced back with his best season ever. He set a team record for yardage receiving, with more than 1,400 yards and was among the league leaders in receptions. He earned All-Pro honors for the second time.

"Yancey really worked hard to get to the level where he is now as a player," Bailey said. He is deserving of the type money he got there (Tenn.). They (Oilers) were in dire need of a starting wide receiver and were willing to pay more than what the market was worth. He had to

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look out for himself and his family. He had to seize the opportunity."

Thigpen hopes to do the same thing when he continues his career with the Oilers.

"When I first went to visit the Oilers, I was very impressed with what they had to say," he 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 (Betts) are to Pittsburgh."

Now his challenge is to put up the kind of number he did with Pittsburgh during his two Pro-Bowl seasons. He also wants to be active in the community.

Recently Thigpen returned to Winston-Salem State, where he sponsored a celebrity benefit basketball game. Proceeds from the game went to the local Boys and Girls Clubs.

He brought in a group that included professional football players Eric Green, of the Baltimore Ravens, Dennis Johnson, of the Oakland Raiders, Ernie Mills, formerly of the Carolina 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."



Yancey Thigpen, accompanied by his parents, accepts a plaque from his alma mater.

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 just to get on the playing field.

A native of Conetoe, N.C., he enjoyed a stellar career at Winston-Salem State. Although playing in a