

Thomas Plays Well but Laments 'L'

BY JACSON LOWE
SENIOR WRITER

EL PASO, Texas — Unfortunately for North Carolina head coach Mack Brown, decision-making is part of a college coach's job description.

For Brown, the first option to start at quarterback in the Sun Bowl was the school's all-time offensive leader, Jason Stanicek, who has amassed 5,497 total yards in his career. Option No. 2 was Mike Thomas, the man who came in to relieve Stanicek in the last 11 quarters of the season and amassed 583 yards and six touchdowns on 33-of-65 passing in that time.

Brown decided to go with the momentum Thomas had going for him, and despite a 35-31 loss to Texas in the bowl game, it seemed to be the wise choice.

The Hamlet native completed 23 passes, a season high for Tar Heel QBs, on 39 attempts for 298 yards and two touchdowns. Not bad considering the strong winds whipping around the Sun Bowl on Dec. 30.

"The last two games of the season, (Thomas) led us to 91 points on offense, and (the team was) averaging about 450 yards per game," Brown said. "Mike's just done a tremendous job while he's been in. I wanted to make sure Jason got in today and got in his last game, but I think at halftime, Mike had completed 15-of-19 passes and just had a tremendous game."

Unfortunately for Stanicek, his insertion to the offense couldn't have come at a worse time. His first drive stalled, and on

the first play of the second quarter, the Park Forest, Ill., native's college career came to an abrupt halt.

On a third-and-5 from the UNC 17, Texas' Thomas Baskin and Tony Brackens sandwiched Stanicek, forcing the ball 15 feet in the air and into the arms of Texas linebacker Norman Watkins, who trotted into the endzone unscathed.

"He's had a great career, and I'm not going to let any disappointment today overshadow what Jason Stanicek has done for this program," Brown said. "I might not be standing here today if Jason Stanicek hadn't come to North Carolina four years ago. He's a tremendous competitor and a great person, and he'll handle today well."

Thomas took the snaps from that point, utilizing his two wideouts, Marcus Wall and Octavus Barnes, and allowing them to each have a superb day.

Barnes hauled in a career-best nine passes for 165 yards, including a 50-yard touchdown strike from Thomas with 9:13 remaining in the game that put the Tar Heels ahead 31-21. Barnes also had 165 yards against Duke.

Wall picked up 82 yards in the air on seven catches and was involved in the nicest pass play of the afternoon. Thomas,

on a second-and-goal from the Texas 8, lofted the ball into the left corner of the end zone, where Wall ran under for the score, reducing the Longhorn lead to 21-17 before halftime.

Wall was quick to give credit to Thomas for the passing game's success.

"Mike's a great leader," he said. "When he's in there, we tend to do some things we might not do when Jason's in there, even though Jason is a great leader. It's just one of those things about how you respond to a certain player."

Texas head coach John Mackovic said he didn't know which quarterback would start for UNC and that it really didn't matter in their pregame preparations.

"We didn't expect that the game would be significantly different if they played either quarterback," Mackovic said. "I personally expected Mike Thomas to play most of the game, and he played very well."

Thomas almost played well enough to eke out a victory. Despite a two-touchdown comeback in the fourth quarter by Texas, Thomas had one more chance to win it, down 35-31 with 1:17 remaining.

Thomas managed to get the ball to the UNC 45 with 46 seconds remaining. It seemed as though the offense was going to pull out another miracle, one like the 71-yard Thomas-to-Barnes touchdown pass against Duke, which put them ahead 41-40 and sealed the victory to finish out the regular season.

But a tipped pass led to an interception by Longhorn Chris Carter and the miracle

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MARCUS WALL
UNC wide receiver

hopes were dashed.

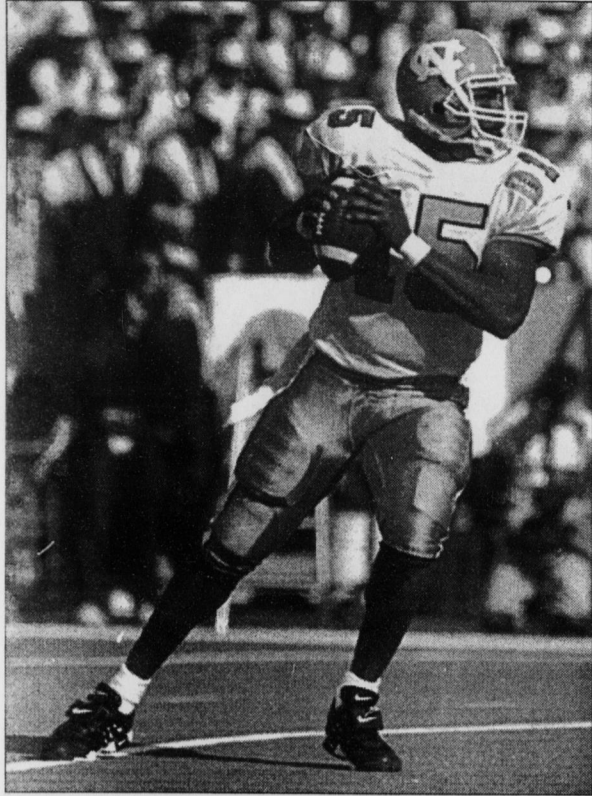
"The team felt so good about themselves, I really felt like they were going to go out and win the game in the end," Brown said. "That's a true credit to Mike Thomas. He's a great competitor, and he put us in a position to win it."

"I still think — and it was a great play by Texas — but if they hadn't tipped his arm on that last play, we might be standing here with a different emotion."

Thomas' only crucial mistake was an illegal forward pass on an option pitch beyond the line of scrimmage. The play occurred at the Texas 27 on a third down. After the loss of down, placekicker Tripp Pignetti missed a 45-yard attempt that could have put the Tar Heels ahead 10-0.

Other than that, Thomas put together one of his best performances at UNC — even though he doesn't consider it as such.

"The only thing I go by is 'W' and 'L,'" he said. "We got an 'L,' so I feel my performance was not up to par."



DTH/KATIE CANNON

When Mike Thomas dropped back to pass in the Sun Bowl, good things usually happened for UNC. But that wasn't the case on the final drive.

SUN BOWL

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mark again. "I knew I'd get back to being 100 percent or almost 100 percent," Holmes said. "I knew that my groin problem would eventually heal itself, and I thank the Lord and everyone out there who helped me — the trainers, everyone."

But even though they trailed with just 1:17 left, the Tar Heels believed the game still was theirs to win. It took UNC just 46 seconds to score on its winning touchdown drive vs. Duke — thanks to a 71-yard strike from Thomas to Octavus Barnes — and the team again expected a big play to end the game.

After a UNC timeout with 46 seconds left, Thomas tried to go up top to Wall on a first-and-10 play from the Texas 43. It didn't work.

"I felt like the end of the game would have been just like the game at Duke, then Mike gets his arm tipped on the last play that was intercepted there, or I still felt like we had a chance to win the ballgame," Brown said.

Wall said the play would have gone all the way if Thomas' arm had not gotten hit on the pass.

"If it hadn't got tipped, it was six," he said. "I was really into the zone. I had him beat."

Instead, the pass floated into Texas free safety Chris Carter's hands. Carter returned the ball 69 yards before it was stripped and UNC recovered at its own 13 with 29 seconds left.

UNC took one more shot deep and Thomas' pass to Barnes on the left side floated just over his fingertips incomplete.

"It felt like the Duke game again," said right tackle Roge Purguson. "The coaches were telling us it was, and I felt like we'd been there before. The momentum of the game was unreal, just like the Duke game."

"I thought we could pull it out. That last play with the interception, when he ran it back — that was just unbelievable. That was just typical. That just underlined how the whole game went."

Instead of a great UNC comeback, it was Texas that came away with a come-from-behind win. Texas head coach John Mackovic said the late resurgence by his team was just as appropriate as it would have been for UNC.

"The way we won, I believe, is more fitting for our football team than if we'd been ahead 35-17 or something, and they were battling back to catch us," Mackovic said. "We've had to overcome so many obstacles throughout the year."

"We've had to battle back. We've had such a stretch on our football program throughout the year that our players and coaches have never, ever given in. We've

UNC vs. Texas

| UNC | 7 | 10 | 0 | 14 | 31 |
|-------|---|----|---|----|----|
| Texas | 7 | 14 | 0 | 14 | 35 |

Scoring Summary

First Quarter
UNC — C. Johnson 11 run (Pignetti kick), 11:08
UT — Holmes 1 run (Dawson kick), 4:37

Second Quarter
UT — Watkins 8 fumble return (Dawson kick), 14:49
UNC — Pignetti 25 field goal, 9:57
UT — Holmes 1 run (Dawson kick), 6:05
UNC — Wal 8 pass from Thomas (Pignetti kick), 0:28

Fourth Quarter
UNC — Wall 82 punt return (Pignetti kick), 13:35
UNC — Barnes 50 pass from Thomas (Pignetti kick), 9:13
UT — Holmes 9 run (Dawson kick), 6:35
UT — Holmes 5 run (Dawson kick), 4:24

Attendance — 50,612

| | UNC | UT |
|--------------------|---------|---------|
| First Downs | 25 | 26 |
| Rushes-yards | 44-180 | 44-229 |
| Passing yards | 298 | 196 |
| Return yards | 136 | 175 |
| Comp-Att-Int | 23-40-1 | 15-32-1 |
| Punts-Avg. | 5-35.4 | 6-35.8 |
| Fumbles-lost | 2-1 | 3-1 |
| Penalties-yards | 6-58 | 7-55 |
| Time of Possession | 28:45 | 31:15 |

Individual Statistics

Rushing: UNC — C. Johnson 17-70, L. Johnson 15-70, Henderson 5-16, Wall 2-30, Thomas 3-4, Marshall 1-11, Stanicek 1-11, UT — Holmes 27-161, Walker 9-19, Brown 7-43, E. Jackson 1-6.

Passing: UNC — Thomas 23-39-1 298, Stanicek 0-1-0 0, UT — Brown 15-31-1 196, C. Jackson 0-1-0 0.

Receiving: UNC — Barnes 9-165, Wall 7-82, Henderson 3-42, L. Johnson 3-13, C. Johnson 1-4, UT — Fitzgerald 6-60, Pinkney 3-29, Holmes 2-44, C. Jackson 1-34, E. Jackson 1-12, Walker 1-12, Kemp 1-5.

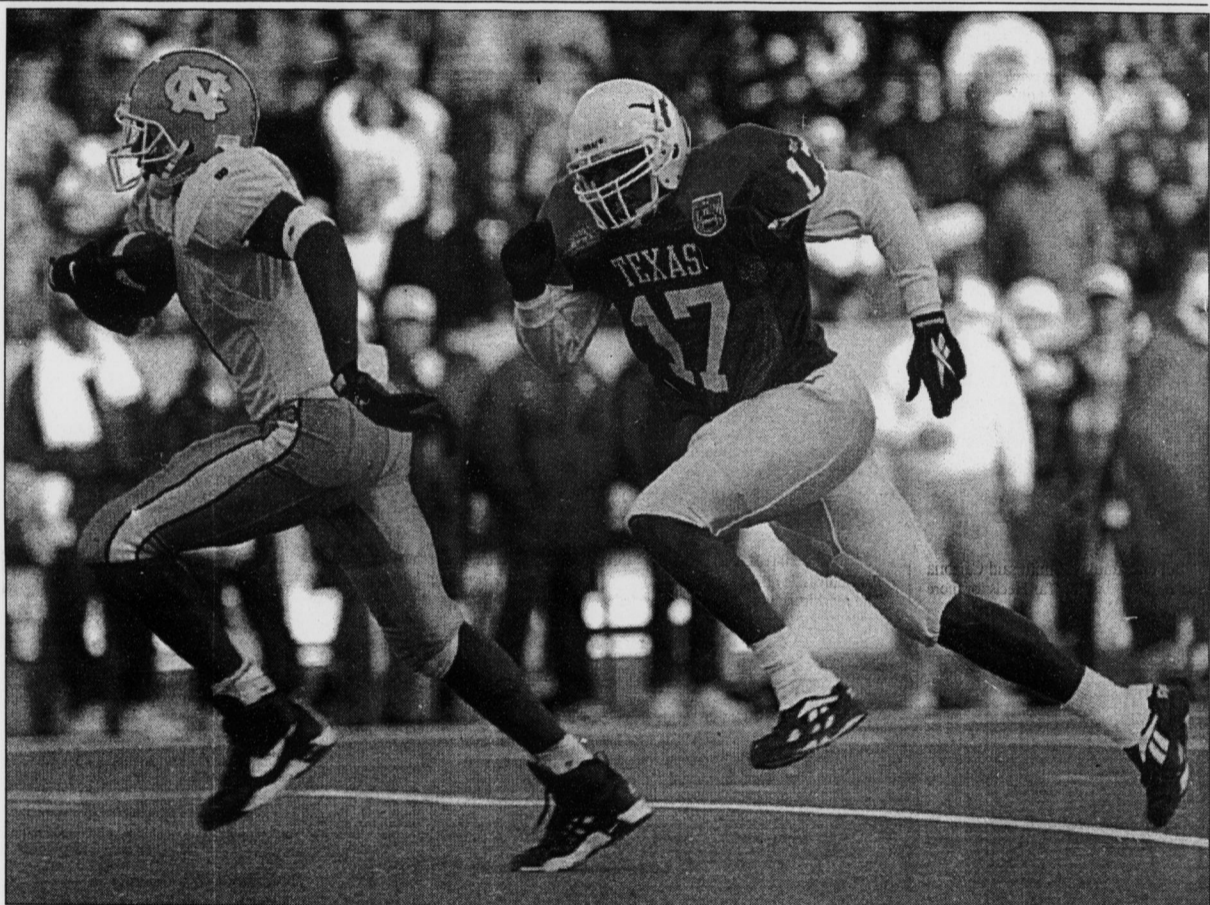
been down, and our football team has really hung in there for a long, long time already. So the victory today really reflects what the season was for us."

From the pregame hype, the Texas-North Carolina matchup promised to be a great contest between two similar teams. Both teams had been hit hard by the injury bug, both had hoped to go to bigger bowls and both came into the Sun Bowl with a quarterback controversy.

Sophomore Shea Morenz and freshman James Brown fought for the Texas QB job. Morenz, a pocket passer, had started eight of the Longhorns' first nine games before injuries and ineffectiveness brought Brown off the bench. Brown went 3-0 as a starter, with wins over Oklahoma, Houston and Baylor. In the Longhorns' final game, vs. Baylor, Brown helped cap a 63-point outburst by scoring four touchdowns.

The Tar Heels' quarterback battle came down to senior Jason Stanicek and Thomas, a junior. Stanicek, a scrambler and masterful option QB who topped the UNC career charts in every major offensive category, would be playing in his final collegiate game.

Like Morenz, injuries had forced Stanicek from several games, and in his stead Thomas came off the bench to lead UNC to a victory at SMU. Thomas started



DTH/KATIE CANNON

Octavus Barnes gallops toward the end zone en route to a 50-yard touchdown reception, which gave North Carolina a 31-21 fourth-quarter lead against Texas.

"These (seniors) have been tremendous. I told them in the dressing room it'd been a great ride, and I appreciated it, and I really hated it for them more than anyone that they couldn't have finished it with a win."

MACK BROWN
UNC head coach

goal team, but Tripp Pignetti's 45-yard attempt sailed wide left and Texas took over.

"It was a close pitch," Thomas said. "I had a first down, and I probably shouldn't have pitched it. I just was trying to do something extra for the football team. That kind of played a key for us. We were down in the red zone and could have gotten closer for Tripp to make a field goal or possibly a touchdown."

Texas took a 17-14 lead into halftime, and the score stayed there until the fourth quarter — when Wall returned the first punt of his career.

It went 82 yards for a touchdown.

"I was actually supposed to fair catch that one, but it was a line drive, and I couldn't pass it up," Wall said. "They didn't cover back fast enough, so I made a couple of moves and put it in the zone."

On UNC's next possession, Thomas and Barnes connected for a 50-yard touchdown.

It was the third time this season that Thomas to Barnes went for 50 yards or more.

All three came in the fourth quarter. All three went for touchdowns. The previous two were UNC's game-winning scores.

This catch looked as though it too would be the game clincher before Texas roared back.

"I felt like we had won the game," Barnes said. "It was just up to us to go out there and hold onto the ball, keep the drive going, and up to the defense to stop them. But things didn't go our way, so we have to live with what we got."

Barnes is just a freshman and will have other games to play as a Tar Heel. But UNC's seniors leave a respectable 8-4, although losses in their last game and final home game — against Clemson — may linger.

They also will leave without a top-25 ranking, the first time in three seasons UNC has not been ranked in the final Associated Press poll.

"These (seniors) have been tremendous," Mack Brown said. "I told them in the dressing room it'd been a great ride, and I appreciated it, and I really hated it for them more than anyone that they couldn't have finished it with a win."

"The two disappointing things — everybody knows we were disappointed at Virginia — but our seniors didn't win their last game at home against Clemson, which is something you'd like for all your seniors to do. And then losing today because it meant so much to them. I think that's why you saw them fight and claw until it was over."

And when it was over, they still couldn't believe that it was.

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