

Thomas now wants to follow Luck's success

By Rick Eymmer
Palo Alto Online Sports

Michael Thomas knew all about Andrew Luck, perhaps even earlier than any of the Stanford football recruiters. After all, the Houston native played against Luck and Stratford High all four years of high school as members of the District 19 5A League.

Thomas, who got to know Luck at a University of Texas football camp, revealed that when Luck committed to Stanford, he knew he was going to follow.

"He probably doesn't even know that he can take some of the credit for me being at Stanford," Thomas said after a recent fall camp session. "If he had committed somewhere else, I would have probably gone there."

Cardinal football coach Jim Harbaugh probably didn't realize it at the time either. But getting Luck was a 2-for-1 deal, with Thomas the added bonus.

"We recruited him for offense," Harbaugh said of Thomas, a junior. "He's an electrifying guy with the ball in his hands. He switched to defense and started at nickel back his freshman year."

Thomas (5-11, 182) likely will start at free safety when Stanford opens the season at home against Sacramento State on Sept. 4. He takes over for the graduated Bo McNally, from whom he learned a great deal about the position.

"I played with him for two years and what he impressed upon me the most is that he knew everybody's assignments," Thomas said. "He knew where everybody was supposed to be and he wasn't afraid to let guys know about it."

Thomas, an option quarterback at Nimitz High, was talented enough to be considered for a number of positions. He also played wide receiver and running back in high school. He was the opposing quarterback against Luck his final two years.

"He beat us both times, but only by a touchdown," Thomas recalled. "He was a great quarterback even then, and when I met him at the camp, he was a great guy. I was a wide receiver there and he was throwing the ball to me."

Thomas was interested in Stanford, but he had looked at other offers before Luck's decision influenced his own.

Thomas, a wide receiver for two weeks before moving to defense ("The coaches all joked I was converting to the dark side," he said), does have 24 rushing yards on his college resume, thanks to a handful of carries behind the Wildcat formation his freshman season. These days he's looking to interrupt such formations and make it hard on the offense to get down field.

"I think the main thing I need to do is communicate with the defense," Thomas said. "It's almost like being a quarterback. I don't mind being vocal. That's something Bo showed me how to do. I want the secondary to be 10 times better than last year and I know Bo would appreciate that."

It was clear to Harbaugh that Thomas needed to be on the field. He didn't waste time finding a spot or two for the versatile player.

"He's a constant hustle guy," Harbaugh said. "He's fast and physical and is always moving his feet and playing physical. He has athletic instincts and we had to find his right position. I think we have done that and he's embraced it."

Thomas was also able to convert some of his offensive prowess over to defense.

"I think I can look for what the quarterback and wide receiver might be thinking," he said. "I've seen the game from a lot of different perspectives. It can only help."

Given the chance, he still hopes to show what he can do with a football in his hands.

"We talk about finishing," Thomas said, "And if there's a chance for an interception, I know what I want to do with it."

Thomas has played in 25 games and has 62 total tackles over his first two seasons in a reserve role in the secondary and prime contributor on special teams. Often overlooked as a return man (thanks to the great season Chris Owusu produced on kickoff returns last year) he has the ability to break a long one. He returned 10 kickoffs for 228 yards (22.8), including a season-long 56-yard return at Arizona. This season could be a real breakout one for Thomas.