

Safety Michael Thomas emerges as defensive cog

Tom FitzGerald, Chronicle Staff Writer

When Andrew Luck's Stratford High School team played Nimitz, another Houston school, Luck would marvel at the other team's quarterback.

"I remember him being the fastest kid I'd ever seen," Luck said. "He'd take the ball and do a sprint-out right and just wouldn't stop running for 80 yards."

The other quarterback, Michael Thomas, was a pal of Luck's; they had attended a football camp together at the University of Texas. Luck's decision to attend Stanford led Thomas to do the same.

Thomas was converted to defense midway through his first preseason camp on the Farm. Two years later, the junior is a starter at free safety and demonstrating quickness with his hands as well as his feet.

Morphing into the Artful Dodger, he spent Saturday night gleefully picking UCLA pockets. After his first strip of the ball near midfield, Stanford drove for a field goal. Later, he stole the ball from quarterback Kevin Prince and ran 21 yards to a touchdown. With five tackles, he was named Pac-10 defensive player of the week.

When Thomas arrived in the end zone, he drew an excessive-celebration penalty, a call that coach Jim Harbaugh has asked the Pac-10 to explain. Thomas gave a "Hook 'em Horns" hand signal to show his love for the state of Texas. But he said he thought the call "was because I wasn't celebrating with my teammates. Well, I was waiting for them to get in the end zone with me."

He said it with a smile, but then, the smile seldom leaves his face. Luck calls him "the most cheerful, jolly person I'd ever met."

His former coach at Nimitz, David Suggs, now at Ball-Galveston, said, "There was never a situation that caused him not to smile. Adversity never bothered him. If we were down in a game, everybody knew, 'We've got to follow Mike.' "

Cal was among the many schools recruiting Thomas, and he and his parents, Michael Sr. and Bernadette, both immigration lawyers, spent 45 minutes in coach Jeff Tedford's office the same weekend they visited Stanford.

"Coach Harbaugh told him the Bears 'want you, but I need you,' " Michael Thomas Sr. said. "That really sold him."

But first, Harbaugh had to take a grilling from the player's older sister, Candacé, at their home. "What are your plans for my brother?" she asked. Harbaugh, thinking he already had the player wrapped up, "was getting worried," the father said with a laugh.

Thomas was also the defensive stopper on the Nimitz basketball team, which also played against Luck's team. "He got a lot of rebounds," Thomas said. "He wasn't much of a threat at scoring - don't tell him I said that."

One school that didn't recruit Thomas was the one he rooted for as a kid: Notre Dame.

"He was looking for them to come after him, but they never did," his father said. "He's got it in for Notre Dame."