

THOMAS LEWIS



Thomas Lewis didn't see himself as a football player...as far as he was concerned track and basketball were his sports. In his younger years it was unnatural for him to be seen without a basketball in his hands. It was not until the age of 8 that Thomas was introduced to the sport of football. His uncle, after observing an unlikely speed for a boy his age, asked Thomas if he had ever thought of being a football player. Thomas then asked his mother if he could play for the area pee-wee football team. Unfortunately, as many mothers are, she was concerned for his safety and she was firmly opposed to the idea. With a little persuading from his uncle however, Thomas was on the team that season, and for every season to come for several years after. It became very obvious he had a skill for the game. It was not until his senior year in high school that Thomas even experienced a loss

on the football field. Winning was the norm for him and he translated that normality into every sport he participated in. During Thomas's senior year he dominated athletically as he lead his football, basketball, and track teams all to the State Championships. In addition to his list of growing athletic accolades, he became the first football player in Ohio history to be named All-State for both and offensive and defensive position. From the outside looking in it seemed clear where Thomas should place his goals and future aspirations. Thomas however was still uncertain as to where his future would lead him.

Thomas learned during his junior year that he was not on track to graduate with his class. He was lacking in several core curriculum credit hours and he would need to take night school in order to have a chance at graduating on time. Thomas started night classes his junior year which continued throughout his senior year. Thomas's schedule was one only someone with profound determination for success could handle. He attended school all day for his regularly scheduled classes; he participated in 3 sports and as such he always had practice after school. Once practice was over he went to night class until 9:30pm. From night class he went to work at a fast food restaurant where he worked until 1:30am. He continued this schedule for two years. His hard work did pay off and Thomas was ready to graduate with his class. It was at this point when his football coach started talking to him about his plan for college. College was not a place that Thomas ever saw himself. His plan was to remain in his home town of Akron, Ohio and work for a local employer like so many others in his community. Once the coach spoke to him about where his athletic abilities could take him, college became a plausible idea. Thomas began meeting with several colleges to discuss his fate and make a choice on where his Alma-mater would be. He signed a letter of intent with the University of Tennessee. Thomas only had one more hurdle to jump before he could turn his intent into a reality. The ACT test had to be passed with a score of 18 or better in order for Thomas to become academically eligible for a college scholarship in football. Thomas can vividly remember driving over-night after competing at his state championship track meet to take the ACT test. It was the last date that was available for him to test. He arrived at the testing center at 7:30am and the test began promptly at 8:00am. On thirty minutes of sleep Thomas finished the exam, and then it was a waiting game.

Regrettably once the wait was over so were his dreams of being the Wide Receiver at a Division 1 school. His dream had been halted by an overall ACT score of 17.8. He had only missed the cut-off by a fraction of points. Thomas received word from the University of Tennessee that they would have to rescind his offer due to academic ineligibility. Once again Thomas found himself in an uncertain position regarding his future. Thomas started to accept the fact that his thoughts of college were over and he allowed reality to settle in. Then an unassuming door opened when Thomas received an unusual invitation to attend the football banquet of his high school rival. The coaching staff from this high school wanted to honor him for his performance against their school. They told him they had never witnessed a player with more heart and opponent or not, that heart deserved to be rewarded. Thomas reluctantly attended the banquet at the request of his mother. Little did he know that by deciding to attend the banquet that day would change the course of his life once again.

It was at the Maslin High School banquet that Thomas was introduced to a coach who had him in his sights, Coach Bill Mallory, from Indiana University. When Coach Mallory approached Thomas he told him he would love to have him on his team. Thomas shared with Coach Mallory that a college football career had become an impossibility to him due to his academic standing. Coach Mallory asked to meet with Thomas's mother to see if they could devise a plan to get Thomas enrolled into IU. The plan Coach Mallory and Thomas's mother came up with was a plan that tested limits and demonstrated a mother's unwavering commitment and belief in her child. Thomas's mother cashed in her pension early to pay for his first year of school at Indiana University and Thomas became a red shirt freshman for the football team. It was that year that Thomas made up his mind that he would never put himself in a place where someone else controlled his destiny again. He delved into his academics with the same persistence he had established on the football field. Thomas received a 3.9 GPA that year and was offered a full scholarship the following year to continue playing for Indiana.

The next year Thomas's athletic career was off to a remarkable start and his grades remained high throughout his first actual season in Indiana. His sophomore year seemed to be moving smoothly until he was faced with yet another challenge. Thomas experienced the abrupt loss of his step-father. Thomas's step-father served not only as his mentor throughout life, but was also his pastor. Needless to say this loss was felt on many levels. Thomas was no stranger to difficulties however, and the lessons his father taught him were etched strongly on his heart. He went into his junior year at Indiana knowing he would have a successful season and he dedicated that season to his father. It was the most successful season in his football career.

Towards the end of the season Thomas's family members started reaching out to him telling him that his mother was having financial difficulties. She had not shared this with her son wishing not to be a burden on him while he was enjoying such success. Nonetheless, once Thomas learned the depth of his mother's struggles he began to entertain the idea of declaring his name in the NFL draft at the end of his junior year, one year sooner than planned. His mother, knowing if her son was not drafted he would lose his scholarship, urged him to stay in school and continue in his education. He promised his mother he would finish his college career no matter what happened.

On January, 10th, 1993, which is coincidentally his birthday, Thomas declared his name in the NFL draft. It was a late choice on his part as it was the last day he could make the choice. It wasn't long after that NFL scouts were coming out to see what this young draft hopeful could do against other veteran players they had already seen perform. As fate would have it, Thomas was handed yet one more obstacle to test his determination. During his trials with the scouts Thomas pulled his hamstring and could not continue with any of the running drills expected of him. The coaches agreed to give him one week to heal and come and see him again. He knew he would not be healed in that amount of time, but he agreed anyway.



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When the day came for him to perform the 40 he wrapped his leg very tight in anticipation of further injury. He had made up his mind to run through the pain. That day with everyone watching and his hamstring pulled he ran a 4.29 40 which was the fastest 40 time from any of the draft hopefuls that year. This 40 time didn't come with ease though; Thomas tore his hamstring in the process and was not able to participate in the NFL combine. Fortunately the scouts had enough to base their decision on and now all Thomas had to do was be patient.

On the day of the draft Thomas was so sure he would not be chosen he asked his mother not to invite anyone to their house. She did not honor that request and when he came home his entire family and several friends were all waiting for him. The first round started early in the day and Thomas decided if he were drafted it would not be until a later round so he went to his room to take a nap and was suddenly awakened by cheers and screams downstairs. He raced down to see what had happened only to discover that the cheers were for him. He had been drafted by the New York Giants in the first round as the 25th pick overall in the 1993 NFL draft.

Thomas remembers that moment feeling surreal. Within a thirty minute time frame news cameras were in his house and a limo was waiting outside to take him to the private jet that would be flying him to New York that day. Once he got off the plane he was handed two large play books and told to have them memorized by the next day. Thus was the beginning of his 6 year career as an NFL wide receiver. Thomas enjoyed a memorable NFL career with New York, San Diego, and Chicago before announcing his retirement from the NFL in 1999.

Thomas enjoyed his time in the NFL and has taken the discipline he gained as an athlete and applied it to several areas of business. He has served as CEO and COO over multi-million dollar companies and provides consulting services to business start-ups of small to mid-level companies. Thomas's most recent endeavor has afforded him the opportunity to give back while simultaneously following a lifetime dream. Thomas is developing an athlete specific training facility which will hold an academic first approach toward every athlete. The facility is called Next Level Sports, LLC. The facility will be headquartered in Phoenix, Arizona with outreach programs that will spread nationwide.

Thomas will be the first to tell you his life was full of adversity and challenges. His perspective is what made those circumstances easy to overcome. It is his belief that everything is about choices, and every choice has a direct consequence that has contributed to his success. It is the hope of Next Level Sports, LLC to provide athletes with strong core-values and a pathway to the right choices. Under Thomas's guidance and with his life experiences in tow, Next Level Sports will make it possible for athletes to avoid the hardships he dealt with. The goal is to create strong academic athletes who are mentally and physically prepared to achieve their dream with ease.



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