

Football: CU Buffs' Gerald Thomas embracing life as father

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Gerald Thomas has a warm and inviting smile that can draw people to him.

For a good chunk of the past year, however, Thomas' smile also served as a shield to keep people from seeing the cauldron of emotions -- stress, frustration, homesickness, and even some joy -- that were boiling inside of him.

"I had a lot on my mind and I didn't tell nobody about it," said Thomas, a sophomore wide receiver on the Colorado football team. "It was all to myself, so it was all bottled up. I would go through phases where I would have breakdowns, but I wouldn't tell nobody about it. I would just walk around with a smile on my face."

These days, Thomas' smile is genuine. His secret -- he became a father on April 7, 2012, two months before he graduated from The Colony High School in Texas -- is no longer a secret. He now has a great support system, a solid relationship with his daughter's mother and a positive outlook on his future in the classroom, on the football field and with his daughter.

Change of plans

Thomas' mother, Crystal, did all she could to help prevent her son from going down the same road she did. Crystal was only 16-years old when Thomas was born on May 8, 1994.

Crystal and Kenneth Ray, Thomas' step father, have raised Thomas together nearly his entire life, and the three of them are very close. Still, life wasn't easy for Crystal as a teenage mom and she didn't want her son to go through what she did. So, when Thomas, who was 17 at the time, told her he was about to be a father, she wasn't happy.

"We talked about this, so I was pissed when I found out, because it could have been avoided," she said. "I even told him my experiences of having him young. I was young and I wanted him to know it's not easy.

"I did warn him; he just got caught up in the mix."

Crystal isn't thrilled with being a 35-year-old grandmother, but nevertheless has supported her son and has grown to love April.

"In the end, it's a blessing," Thomas said.

Staying involved

Thomas' biological father, Gerald Lewis, is currently serving a life sentence, without the

possibility of parole, for a murder he committed in Louisiana in 1997, when Thomas was just 3-years old.

"My real dad, he wasn't around," Thomas said. "I always told myself I was going to be the best parent for my kid in the future, it just happened to come at a young age."

April and her mother, Alyssa, still live in Texas, so Thomas isn't around every day. He is as devoted as he can be right now, however.

"I do everything I can," he said. "I send back diapers, clothes, anything she needs when I go down there. Any money I have goes toward my daughter. I put her first. She's the most important thing in my life right now."

Although Thomas and Alyssa were never a couple, and they did have some rocky times early on, Thomas said he appreciates everything Alyssa has done to help him to have a close relationship with April.

"It's made everything easier," Thomas said.

Thomas has April's footprints, name and birthday tattooed on his chest. That's an everyday reminder of the love of his life, but nothing replaces the personal interaction he gets from time to time.

"When he's here and getting (April) dressed and he's talking with her and he's playing with her, she's touching him on his face and she's touching his muscles," Crystal said. "I just sit back and look at him and smile."

"He will never be a deadbeat, not as long as I'm around."

Out of focus

During the 2012 football season, Thomas was one of the few bright spots in a disastrous football season for the Buffaloes. As a true freshman, the 5-foot-11, 175-pound Thomas showed flashes of being a playmaker. He caught 18 passes for 171 yards and ran the ball nine times for 56 yards.

Throughout it all, he couldn't stop thinking about April. He would visit her on the team's bye week or during breaks, but it wasn't enough.

"During the season, I let football keep my mind off of it, but once the season was over, I just wanted to be with her the whole time," he said.

Thomas actually considered leaving CU to be closer to April, but Crystal and Ray helped talk him out of it.

Thomas stayed, but his mind clearly was not focused, so first-year Buffs head coach Mike

MacIntyre gave Thomas time off. Thomas sat out the second half of spring drills, including the spring game.

"He told me to focus on my grades, get my head right and come back to the summer ready to work," Thomas said. "I wasn't right mentally. On the football field I was there, but in the classroom, I couldn't focus."

Many of Thomas' teammates had no idea he had a daughter, and therefore didn't understand why he was on campus but not on the field. He was uncomfortable telling too many people at first, but now they all know.

"Once they all found out, they always ask how my daughter is doing," Thomas said. "Letting it out more helps with the stress."

Bright future ahead

This summer, Thomas has been back on the field with his teammates. The return of Paul Richardson from injury and the addition of freshman Jeff Thomas has given the Buffaloes the potential for more explosive plays in the passing games.

Gerald Thomas is excited about being a part of it, and making big plays of his own.

"Being back playing football, it's always a good thing," he said. "I'll move around from the slot to the outside to be a deep threat. I even told them, give me some carries (in the running game) -- just any way to help my team win. Just get the ball in my hands and let me do what I love doing."

Football figures to be more enjoyable this season because life is more enjoyable for Thomas. He realizes that, in addition to playing football, CU is giving him an opportunity to get his education, which will, hopefully, lead to a good job that can help him to support April in the future.

For now, Thomas enjoys whatever time he gets with April, because nobody brings out his smile like she can.

"She's the best thing in my life."

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