



WHITNEY THOMAS
Hometown girl

by **Michael Koryta**
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makes

good

>>> Bloomington residents have spent a lot of time in recent years cheering for hometown athletes whose talents have taken them far away—Rex Grossman, Jared Jeffries, and Sean May come to mind. There's one local star, however, who is staying close to home, quietly piling up impressive performances on the Indiana University women's basketball team.

“It seems like everyone I knew in high school said: ‘I’ve just got to get out.’ I never even really thought about going anywhere else. That just wasn’t me. I love this town.”



A respected role model, Whitney signed posters for young fans at the College Mall prior to the season's first contest. As a freshman, Whitney led the Hoosiers with 7.2 rebounds per game and averaged 6.1 points.

Relaxing at her parents' home after dinner, Whitney shares a laugh with her mother Kim; big brother, Kyle; and father, Will. “I like being close to my family,” she says.



Whitney Thomas, 19-year-old Bloomington North graduate and current IU sophomore, is a standout on the court at Assembly Hall. Last season, Thomas was named to the Big Ten conference's all-freshman team and ranked fifth in the conference in rebounding. Now in her second year, she is a team captain and a budding star.

Hometown fans knew that Thomas wasn't an ordinary high school athlete. A two-sport standout, she could have gone to many of the nation's top college programs for volleyball as well as basketball.

But don't try to talk to her about these accomplishments.

Thomas doesn't enjoy talking about herself unless it is in the context of her team's performance. When individual achievements are mentioned, she changes the subject back to her team. Try to lure her into a conversa-

tion about her life off the court, she quickly returns the focus to basketball. She speaks carefully and seems to avoid saying anything that might sound self-congratulatory. Interviewing her, you get the sense that Whitney Thomas doesn't think she's anything special. It's those around her who do.

Her love for Indiana

IU's new head coach Felisha Legette-Jack selected her as a team captain even though Thomas had only been playing at the college level for one year. Legette-Jack said it was an easy choice. “She is a dream for any head coach. She is a born leader. When you have a person like her, you don't wait, you allow her to emerge.”

When asked what qualities stood out in her early meetings with Thomas, Legette-Jack had a ready answer: “Her passion, her love for

Indiana, her ability to give all of herself for the sake of the team.”

The passion for Indiana is one of those things that kept Thomas in Bloomington for college. As a member of top-ranked basketball and volleyball teams in high school, Thomas saw many of her friends and teammates depart for schools around the country. “It seems like everyone I knew in high school said: ‘I've just got to get out.’” Their decisions did not influence her own, though — she was determined to stay in Bloomington. “I never even really thought about going anywhere else,” she said. “That just wasn't me. I love this town.”

Her family is another reason she is still here. Older brother, Kyle, 20, is an offensive lineman on the IU football team, and her parents, Will and Kim Thomas, are ardent supporters of both children and their teams.



Whitney listens intently as Head Coach Felisha Legett-Jack goes over a play at practice. Says the coach, "Whitney is a born leader."

"I like being close to my family," said Thomas, who credits her parents with support and her brother with motivation.

"My brother is the one who's toughest on me," she said. "My parents, they're pretty much there for support and because they love the game. But with Kyle, after every game, even if it is a great game, he will still tell me what I did wrong, the things I need to change. It's great, because it makes me a lot better. He watches everything I do, and he played basketball in high school and knows the game."

Knows the game, maybe, but Thomas won't concede any advantage to her brother who stands 6' 4" and weighs 290 pounds.

"We still play one-on-one sometimes, and he thinks he can beat me now because he's so much bigger and stronger," she said. "I try to show him a few things."

Playing in one's hometown brings an extra

level of scrutiny to an athlete's life on and off the court, but Thomas claims that she experiences only the benefits of remaining in Bloomington.

Pressure. What pressure?

"It's not pressure at all for me, just another level of support," she said. It is a typical answer from her—spun toward the positive. Ask her about her physical battles—two devastating knee injuries—and she'll tell you they made her stronger. Ask about the coaching carousel she's experienced since coming to Indiana, she'll say it brought the team together. Her tone is always polite, always serious. But former North volleyball coach and current friend Eugene Kim, said that beneath the focused demeanor lurks a wonderful sense of humor.

"She's a prankster," he said. "Whitney is

responsible for one of the greatest pranks in the history of North volleyball."

Thomas joined her teammates for a dinner one weekend night and threw out an idea. Since the coach and his roommates were known to be out of town—he'd told the girls this himself—why not wrap his house in toilet paper. With her teammates in favor of the plan, Thomas urged them to wait until a little later for their attack. Why not watch a movie first? Maybe *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*.

"She set this all up beforehand," Kim said. "Had me tell them that we'd be out of town and picked the movie. They came by my house at about 10:30 pm. My roommates and I had borrowed some chainsaws and waited until the girls were in the yard before we came out of the bushes and let the chainsaws rip."



“An unbelievable natural athlete”

Thomas began playing basketball when she was just four years old, learning the game at the Bannaker Community Center, and has been in the local spotlight since playing in recreational leagues and AAU tournaments. Kim remembers that “by the time she got to Bloomington North as a freshman, everyone knew who she was. This is a girl who came to competitive volleyball fairly late and still could have gone to any top-ten program in the country. Just an unbelievable natural athlete.”

He has vivid memories of the volleyball season Thomas lost to injuries, but they are more about the person he saw than the player he lost. “She didn’t need to go to a single practice or a single match after she got hurt,” he said. “But she went to all of them. She stood there on the sidelines and cheered and coached her teammates, and I remember

thinking that I was even more proud of the sort of kid she was than the sort of athlete. To have all that talent, all those accolades, and still have the attitude she does is really special.”

Thomas also has fond memories of North—especially the gym. “There’s a lot of basketball history in that gym,” she said, “and that is where one of the best high school coaches of all time coached, Tom McKinney.”

McKinney’s boys’ teams won one state championship and lost in the final game in pursuit of a second while Thomas was growing up in Bloomington. Another famous coach she said she would have been happy to play for is Bob Knight—an important part of the history of a university she considers a giant in athletics.

“Athletics might seem to be on the downside right now, but there are a lot of great players who’ve come to Indiana and there’s a lot of tradition here. I watched games on TV growing

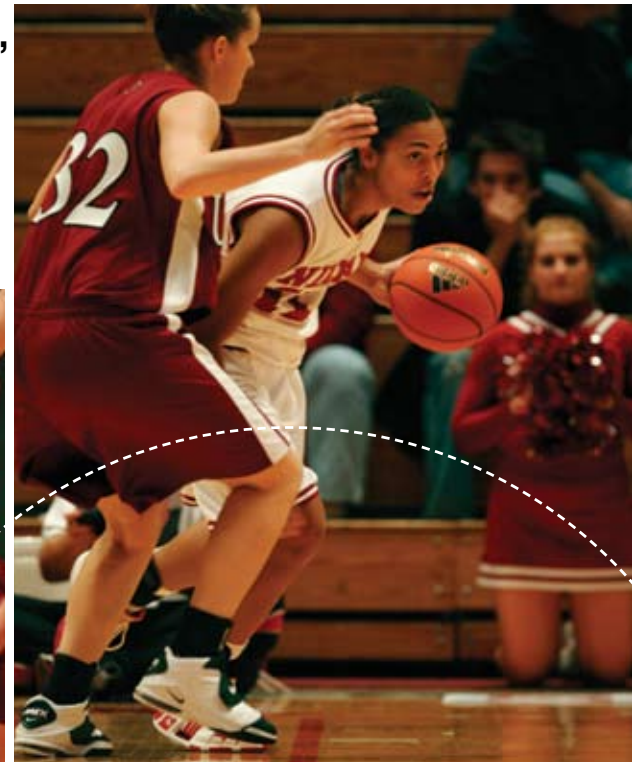
up, and to be able to play in Assembly Hall... it’s a special place, an opportunity a lot of people don’t get.”

Her commitment to the school is clear. Thomas is now on her third coach and says she has never considered transferring. She was recruited by Kathi Bennett, who was replaced by Sharon Versyp, who resigned after last season to take the coaching job at Purdue. Legette-Jack—Coach Jack to her players—represents yet another new face, but Thomas doesn’t seem concerned about the constant turnover.

“Yes, it’s been a lot of change, but I didn’t have to play for all three coaches like our juniors and seniors did,” she said. “Coach Jack and Coach Versyp are totally different. Coach Jack has more energy, where Coach V was more laid-back, quieter.”

The energy difference will also be evident

The WNBA someday? “I mean, it would be a great opportunity if it happened, but I’ve got a lot to work on to help my team right now, and that’s what I’m worried about.”



In the first exhibition game of the season against the University of Indianapolis, Whitney came out strong, leading all players with 16 points, 11 rebounds, and 7 steals as the Hoosiers won 66-35.

After the game, Coach Felisha Legett-Jack said of Whitney, “She is the most humble person you’ll ever meet and the most relentless player you’ll ever see.”

in the team’s approach, according to Thomas.

“Coach Jack says she wants us to be a full-court-pressing team, which we definitely were not last year,” she said.

Her emotional strength impresses

At an even 6 feet, Thomas is one of the smallest power forwards in the Big Ten and not opposed to picking up the pace. “It’s not just me being undersized, it’s our whole team being undersized in the Big Ten. “We need to use our quickness to help with that.”

Thomas has also spent time in the weight room trying to improve her strength.

“When I first came here, my teammates used to make jokes about how small my arms were,” she said. “Not so much anymore.”

Strength—of the physical and emotional variety—is what first impressed Legett-Jack when she arrived at Indiana, met Thomas,

and watched her in game tapes.

“Whitney is a relentless player,” Legett-Jack said. “Undersized, not the best shot, but you want her in your starting line up because you want a chance to win.”

Thomas, who lives off-campus in the company of her miniature schnauzer, Kato, and her brother’s pit bull, Rece, is an exercise science major who plans to attend nursing school. Because she is an elite player in an elite conference, the WNBA might present an option, but Thomas insists she doesn’t think about that.

“I mean, it would be a great opportunity if it happened, but I’ve got a lot to work on to help my team right now, and that’s what I’m worried about,” she said.

Thomas faces a demanding schedule during the season. Early morning weight training, a full load of classes, practice sessions, and study tables are the ingredients of a normal day for

her and her teammates. Add long nights of travel for road games, and it’s a challenging routine, but Thomas thinks it should be easier this season.

“The freshman year is tough because you have to adjust to the early mornings and late nights, but I think by your second year you get used to the pattern,” she said.

Having her family in town helped her make the adjustment. Thomas is clearly close to her family. When asked what her favorite restaurant in Bloomington is, Thomas’ first response was, “My dad usually cooks.”

“She is a complete reflection of her parents,” former coach Kim said. “They are both such wonderful people, and you see that in Whitney. In all the talk about her athletic achievements—and she is an outstanding athlete—what sometimes gets lost is the sort of person she is.” ✨