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RAMSEUR - After an incredible high school basketball career that started at West Carteret and finished as a state champion at Greensboro Day School, Johnny Thomas had the basketball world at his fingertips.

The 2008 high school graduate had his choice of colleges of which to continue his academic and basketball careers. He decided on N.C. State.

Like most who play the game at the level he could play, he had dreams of playing in the NBA. But an unfortunate series of injuries forced Thomas to change his path, a path that most recently led him to becoming the head varsity basketball coach at Eastern Randolph High School.

For Thomas, it was a long road to Ramseur, a road filled with ups, downs, joys, disappointments and incredible experiences.

"I'm where I need to be," Thomas said prior to last Friday night's 93-60 victory over Providence Grove, which kept the Wildcats undefeated in Piedmont Athletic Conference play. "I'm where I need to be."

After three seasons at West Carteret, he spent two seasons at Greensboro Day, winning a state championship. He had his pick of colleges to attend including N.C. State, Florida State, Wake Forest and Clemson.



Johnny Thomas, head coach of Eastern Randolph men's basketball. Photo provided by J Thomas.



Thomas in action for NC State. Photo provided by J Thomas.

Because Thomas had left his home to attend Greensboro Day, his mom was a big influence in deciding on N.C. State. And everything was going well until the first day of live workouts when Thomas suffered a severe knee injury and some doctors said he would never play again.

"I was talking to my mom and I was upset and she was upset and then we asked what we were going to do," Thomas said. "We had to figure something out. I was staying at State and decided to pursue my academics really heavily. I took 21 hours per semester and was able to graduate in two and a half years."

During that time, his injury healed and he was able to return to the basketball court for the Wolfpack. His freshman season, he was averaging about 11 minutes per game, but those minutes fell to about five per game his sophomore year.

"After the injury, I got back to practice and everyone was telling me to be patient, be patient," Thomas said. "But once you get injured, they are recruiting based on that situation, so I was getting spot time here or there. As a player who had always been in the mix, I felt my best course of action was to pursue another (school)."

Pursuing his Masters Degree at Marshall, Thomas again battled injuries, but had a solid year. He appeared in 30 games, starting 17. He was averaging about 25 minutes per game and putting up 9.1 points per game. He broke double figures 12 times and had a season-high 20 points against Southern Miss. And just like he did in the ACC, he was named to the all-academic team.

"That was one thing I took great pride in," Thomas said. "Whenever I was offered a scholarship from a university, I wasn't going to be a one-dimensional athlete."

Thomas was then drafted 17th overall by the Springfield Armor in the then D-League (which is now the G-League). He was playing really well and heard rumors he was about to be called up, but his foot was bothering him and after recording a triple-double one night, he decided to have it looked at the next morning.

The foot was broken.

He went back to North Carolina and had the foot surgery and returned the next season to the Armor, but he said things just weren't the same. He decided to go to Germany and play there, where he spent the next year and a half.

"It was good," Thomas said. "The culture was a lot different. The environment was lovely. Coming off the foot injury, I felt I had to prove myself. I was back to where I was at N.C. State. I figured basketball may not be what I need to do any more. I kept getting injured. Maybe I would go get a normal job when I got back."

Normal? No.



Thomas playing for Marshall University. Photo provided by J Thomas.



Photo provided by J Thomas.

Thomas had a friend with the Harlem Globetrotters named John Williams who had played in Asheville. Williams talked Thomas into becoming a member of the family-friendly Harlem Globetrotters.

"I really didn't know if I wanted to be a Globetrotter, but they called me up and I said let's try it," Thomas said.

It worked out very well.



*Thomas as a member of the Harlem Globetrotters.
Photo provided by J Thomas.*

"I found out this is where I need to be," said Thomas, who took the nickname "Hawk" while a Globetrotter. "To see all these happy faces, this is where I needed to be. It's the traveling and the family aspect. I really enjoyed being with the guys and sharing team moments. I was finally happy again. I was injury free. I had just had my son and everything was so relaxing. I needed something to reignite that flame and that was the Globetrotters. I've been to every single state several times and I loved it."

All the traveling, especially after having his two daughters, finally took its toll.

"It got to a point where I was missing so much and all I was getting was pictures of my kids," Thomas said. "One thing my parents always stressed was family and the one thing I was missing was family."

The Thomas family lived in Pittsboro for a while, and while working for the Chatham County Sheriff's Department in 2016, Thomas began Rising Pro Training, an organization that helps kids improve their basketball and life skills.

"I started with just four kids in Pittsboro and within a few months, a few more people approached me," Thomas said. "Then WRAL did a story and it went from 10 to 50 and 50 turned into 80 and 80 into 110. It was something I loved to do and my mom had always told me to do something you love to do."

After nearly five years with the CCSD, he left to give RPT his full attention.

"Rising Pros Training gives me the opportunity to work with kids to improve their skill level, but also their confidence level," Thomas said in a recent interview. "My goal is to teach kids the value of hard work and how you have to continue to push past obstacles. I love showing people what they are capable of."

A couple of players from Eastern Randolph were working with Thomas at RPT and ER Athletic Director Foster Cates reached out to Thomas on a couple of occasions to see if he would be interested in taking the ER varsity boys basketball program. The first time, Thomas

was still working with the CCSD and elected to stay closer to his Pittsboro home. But he stayed in touch with his players from ER.

He expanded into coaching middle school and then at Chatham Central High School while working with kids from all across the area through RPT.

"I went to a game last year against Uwharrie Charter and Eastern had like a 20-point lead, but I knew they were going to lose the game by the way they were acting," Thomas said. "I was watching their demeanor and some were taking it seriously and some weren't. When I left, I bumped into Foster and told him if an opening ever came up, I would be interested. I decided that was the place I needed to be."

Now he's leading the Wildcats to one of their most successful seasons in school history as ER is 6-0 in the Piedmont Athletic Conference and 15-1 overall heading into Friday's non league game with Eastern Alamance. ER has a 15-game winning streak and is ranked second in the Western Region, behind only Mountain Heritage.

"We will continue to work hard and show everyone it can be done," Thomas said.

The road from a high school player to coaching at Eastern Randolph High School has been a long one for Thomas. But despite twists, turns, setbacks and disappointments, Thomas continues to move forward and thrive and that's exactly what he's teaching his players.

And all he comes into contact with is certainly better for that. On and off the basketball court.



*Johnny Thomas, men's basketball coach at ERHS.
Photo provided by J Thomas.*