

SATSUMA GATORS

You've got to believe

Coach Justin Thomas shows with his own life and his achievements with the Gators that the right attitude can accomplish anything

BY DARRON PATTERSON
Call News Correspondent

Ever since Justin Thomas was young he's attacked life with a passion.

He catches the bull before the bull catches him, he never quits, when the going gets tough the tough keep going — you know, all those clichés people use to inspire themselves to achieve things they think they can't.

But, there's nothing cliché about Justin Thomas' life. "I was fortunate. I had two parents who instilled in me from childhood how to overcome challenges," said the 38-year-old Thomas, in his third year as Satsuma head coach.

"Through sports, my parents knew it would present me some challenges I'd have to figure out how to overcome."

Born with only a partial left arm, the 38-year-old Thomas has refused to be stopped, turning what society typically views as a handicap into a springboard for success.

"I've been playing baseball since I was 4 years old, and I've never allowed myself to believe there isn't anything I can't accomplish."

The confidence Thomas' parents made sure he instilled in himself has carried over not only to his players, but to the Satsuma community.

"What once was a baseball school has now turned into a football school," he said.

"I've had a couple of kids who wanted to quit baseball and concentrate on football, and I had to go 'Wait! Hold on now! We need our athletes to play as many sports as they can.'"

"The community is buying in, too. I had a guy call me the other day and said, 'With you and coach Cauley I'm expecting a state championship.'"

"I said, 'Wait! Hold on now!'" Thomas said with a laugh.

With the unexpected addition to the staff of former Murphy head coach Rick Cauley, who abruptly left Gulf

Shores in June after only six months on the job, and is now Satsuma's assistant head coach/offensive coordinator, the town is even more excited about what Thomas is doing.

"At the gas stations and the Chevrons, they want to talk football. You didn't really get that when we first got there. They pat me on the back now and they want to talk football, talk about expectations."

To be clear, Thomas' predecessor, Scott Rials, began the Satsuma football resurrection in 2014, leading the Gators to a 6-4 record before leaving to take over as head coach at Luverne.

The Gators were 1-1 in Thomas' first year going into a road game at Thomasville, a place visiting teams never want to play.

The Gators lost by just a touchdown (20-14) and went on to finish the year 4-7, but Thomas knew which way the program was headed.

"They had some confidence about them, and it went back down that first year. We were one game away from making the playoffs."

"We have athletes up here, but we've lost a lot of kids to Saraland, UMS, St. Paul's, McGill. Our thing was we just want to get these kids back."

"The new stadium has helped, but we felt if we could just get those kids back. And with our coaching staff and the energy, I guarantee we can build this thing the way it needs to be built."

But it's Thomas' penchant for getting the most out of his players that's taking the program to new levels.

"They know I don't take excuses," said the

Mobile native of his players.

"I think their confidence is growing. When they walk off the bus they're not going to look the part, most of them, but they believe."

"We have a saying: 'Don't let them lie to you.'"

"It doesn't matter whether you're going against somebody 6-foot-4, if you believe in your coaching and you believe in yourself, you can go win the battle."

"The good Lord has blessed me to motivate. How many head football coaches in the state of Alabama have one arm?" he asked.

Just one, coach, and he's a very rare guy named Justin Thomas.



Satsuma coach Justin Thomas



The Satsuma High School seniors.

Confident corner Burrell: 'We want to be showstoppers'

BY DARRON PATTERSON
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Confidence isn't something you have to teach Daniel Burrell.

"I run a 4.48 40, I like to play mean and nasty. And I like to get into you," said Satsuma's senior cornerback about himself.

And just how does he want his defensive teammates to play? Anything like him?

"I expect us to go out on every snap and dominate, win games."

Now, don't mind that Burrell is a relatively slight 5-8, 175 pounds.

He talks the talk of somebody a foot taller and 100 pounds heavier.

"We want to be showstoppers — stop the pass, stop the pass, lock down the secondary, anything coming up the middle those linebackers are right there," he said.

Burrell and his teammates have a single-minded goal this year.

"We have to just win; be first (or) second in the region to host a playoff game."

"But we don't just want

to host a game, we want to win that game!

"We want them to come into The Swamp and see the atmosphere," he said in reference to the name slapped on the Gators' new \$4.2 million home christened last season.

"That's our place. That's our territory. We don't give up home-field advantage, ever," he said, with emphasis on *ever*.

"This year we want it all. Last year, the goal was to get to a playoff game, and we got there but that was it. Everybody just kind of chilled out, relaxed. The expectations just all changed out."

Satsuma was bounced 49-21 by St. James in the 4A playoffs' first round.

Burrell wants more, and is setting his sights on big things after making adjustments since transferring in last year.

"Coming from a 7A program (Davidson) to a 4A program is different. Smaller environment, everybody's closer together, it's a family."

"I just wasn't used to that and it took some time

to adjust to it. But I'm good now.

"Coach (Justin Thomas) has done a lot," he continued about his transition. "I didn't really get before what coach Thomas

gives me now. He's calling my phone, bugging me sometimes trying to make sure I'm OK."

"(After) I had a surgery, he was calling my phone during a couple of days

when I wasn't really feeling like football was for me anymore."

"He was encouraging me, calling me, texting me. He's been there for me." Rumor has it around

Satsuma that the speedy Burrell might see double duty this year, too, playing a little offense.

"We're testing stuff out at the moment," he said with a coy smile.



309 First Ave,
Saraland, AL 36571 \$124,900

This adorable home in the heart of Saraland features a very spacious family room, three spacious bedrooms, with one full bath and one half bath. There are original hardwood floors in the family room and formal dining room, wood laminate in the bedrooms and tile in all wet areas. The kitchen features custom cabinets, tile counter tops and a breakfast nook. There is a detached one car garage and outside laundry with an abundance of storage space that could be used as an outdoor office or bonus room. The large back yard is completely fenced.



Kelly Snell

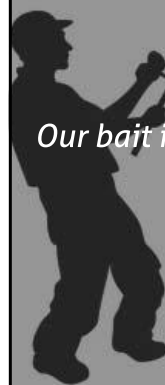
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