

SARALAND

DJ Thomas survives 'wild ride'

He commits to Ole Miss and now will concentrate on helping Spartans win this fall



Saraland tight end DJ Thomas flashes his Ole Miss gloves.

BY TOMMY HICKS
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Saraland's DJ Thomas found himself the "It" recruit this past summer, the sudden darling of the recruiting trail college coaches wanted to see and talk to and, hopefully, convince to join their team.

Thomas, who has been used as a wide receiver in the past by the Spartans, is being moved to tight end, and that change triggered a recruiting frenzy when coaches, recognizing his ability to catch the football, his athleticism and his size — 6-foot-3, 229 pounds. That made him a popular player.

Really popular.

"He's had an outstanding offseason," Saraland head coach Jeff Kelly said. "He really lit the world up in the spring. The recruiting circuit, with people coming through and seeing him, it's been unbelievable. He's really been a receiver for us but he's going to be a tight end."

While the switch isn't that big a change for Thomas or the Saraland offense, it does create some added opportunities to get the ball in Thomas' hands, which Kelly likes. But what the switch accomplished was to put Thomas in a completely different light with recruiters, who at this moment in time covet the tight end-receiver hybrid player, especially at Power 5 conferences that often feature offenses in which a player like Thomas can flourish.

A lot of colleges made their pitch to Thomas and during the summer he made his choice, offering his verbal commitment to Ole Miss.

"It was a wild ride," Thomas said of his recruitment. "I never thought I'd make it this far. It's just a dream. I'm glad that I had

the chance to experience this and that I had a chance to prove that I can do something. I want to be better than what I am today. I want to get better every day."

In preparation for the change, while he of course connected with quarterback Brett Nezat and ran routes and worked on timing on passes, the majority of the time Thomas could be found with the guys up front, the offensive line group, watching them and learning what he can about blocking in an effort to add that to his arsenal.

"Honestly, it doesn't matter to me," Thomas said about working to improve his blocking talents more than his pass-catching skills. "I'm a team player and whatever I can do to help the team I'm going to do. But it's really different (working on blocking). But we'll get it down pat."

He said while the learning curve may be taking longer than he hoped or imagined, he has picked up a lot since the start of the summer. And he said he knows that work he is putting in now will pay dividends down the road, both with Saraland and at Ole Miss.

"I see it," he said. "I've just got to work, and you can't beat hard work. I need to work on my blocking and get in the weight room. I'm trying to get to 230 and I'm 229 right now. I'm trying to get as big as I possibly can."

Kelly said there's a lot to like about Thomas and what he offers.

"The thing that's really exciting about him is that he can be effective in the run game as a blocker and it has allowed us to do a lot of different things and use a lot of different formations to get him involved,"

See **THOMAS**, 47C

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