

## Determination propels Brittney Thomas into record books - and across the sea

Written by Sher Jasperse

Sunday, 12 June 2011 16:25 - Last Updated Sunday, 12 June 2011 17:11

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Where volleyball is concerned, Brittney Thomas has had only two goals “my whole life,” she says. “I wanted to be captain of an All-Tournament team at state and I want to be an All-American in college. Fifty percent of my goals have been accomplished.”

The second goal seems attainable as well for the Mount Mercy University junior-to-be, a Marion High School grad who led her prep team to the 3A state title in 2009 and was named captain of the All-Tournament squad. Whatever happens, collegiate volleyball has already taken her to places she never imagined.

In her first season at Mount Mercy, Thomas broke the school’s single-season kills record with 504 and was named to the All-Conference team. She earned All-Conference honors again this past year and is on pace to break Mount Mercy’s career kills record of 1,283, set by Amy Osenbaugh in 1990-1993, in only her junior year next season.

At 5-foot-8, Thomas is not the tallest player on her team – or even the tallest of the three volleyball playing Thomas sisters, who include Jessica, a junior at Marion, and Alyssa, an eighth grader. Alyssa describes her oldest sister, who has been “hitting balls at my face as hard as she can since I was a little kid,” as one of her heroes.

The Thomas girls were nudged toward volleyball by their mother, Janet, who played volleyball at William Penn University. Their father, Greg, played baseball and basketball for the Statesmen. “My mom and dad are both really great athletes,” says Brittney.

The family moved to Marion when Brittney was in fourth grade after her father was named principal at Marion High School. “My mom put me in some volleyball camps and I just loved it,” she says. Thomas played club volleyball and joined the Vernon Middle School team. As a freshman at Marion, she played one game on the sophomore squad before being moved to the varsity.

A left-side, back-row hitter, Thomas says she loves volleyball “because everyone can do it. You don’t have to be tall. It’s very fast-paced and competitive and there’s always something going on. That’s why my dad loves it,” she says of her most avid fan. “My parents are always going

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everywhere to watch us.”

Thomas is a self-described “homebody” who found nearby Mount Mercy to be a great collegiate fit. “I’m very close to my parents and my sisters. I’m going into business, and Mount Mercy has a great business program.” The university recognized her superb academic record by awarding her its top academic scholarship.

No one is happier about her choice than Mustangs volleyball coach Rick Blackwell. “Brittney has outstanding ability, she has very strong leadership skills, and she’s as sharp as a tack,” he says. “She’s just a wonderful kid to coach, and she’s excellent in the classroom.”

Thomas is among the best players he has coached, says Blackwell, comparing her to Iowa City Regina graduate Jeni Streb. “Brittney is cut from the same mold. She has that drive and determination. She’s not the tallest, but she’s just quick to the ball. She analyzes very well what the opponent is doing and adjusts.”

### **Volleyball across the pond**

Thomas’ talent also caught the attention of USA Athletics International, which tapped her to be part of a Midwest all-star volleyball team that spent nine days playing and sightseeing in Scotland in May.

Thomas was the only Iowan and the only sophomore invited to join the group. “I was unsure at first,” she says, “but I felt it was a once in a lifetime opportunity.”

During the trip, she progressed quickly from intimidation to exhilaration. “I was scared to death at first,” she admits, “leaving my mom and dad for nine days to play with people I had never met or played with.”

But her teammates embraced her from the outset and her eyes were soon opened to the joys of travel. “On our first day in Edinburgh we went to a castle, and it was absolutely crazy how beautiful it was.” The team also enjoyed shopping and visiting the famed St. Andrews golf course. “My dad was jealous about that, but I brought him a hat,” she says.

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Of course, they also had plenty of court time, playing against two Scottish national teams and several club teams before earning third place at the tournament that concluded their tour.

“It was an incredible experience. The volleyball was great and the culture was great, but getting to bring back all the friendships was what was really important,” says the girl who never wanted to leave home. “Now I want to go back and keep traveling. ”

Her more immediate goal is leading her Mount Mercy team to a winning season. After a number of close, five-game losses that kept them hovering around .500 the last two years, the team spent the spring in an intensive training regimen that Thomas believes will help make them competitive with the top teams in the NAIA Midwest Collegiate Conference.

“We are fully dedicated to getting there this year. I have two years left, and I don’t plan on having a losing record. I’m very big into heart,” she adds. “You can’t win without it. In high school we were a small team playing a very tall team. We were the underdogs, but we won with heart.”

With majors in accounting, finance and management, Thomas also dreams of owning her own accounting firm someday with a sideline as a volleyball coach. She is already coaching the Marion Magic AAU team and loves it, she says.

“My goal is to be a high school coach and make my way to college. It will always be a part of my life. Volleyball teaches determination, responsibility and hard work. In the Thomas family, it will always be there.”