

Les Schwab Bowl: West Linn's Brandon Thomas and father inspire each other to keep fighting

Jerry Ulmer, *The Oregonian*, June 21, 2010 10:18 p.m.



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West Linn's Brandon Thomas blocks Adam Evers (68) of Southridge in practice Monday night for the Les Schwab Bowl. - (Brent Wojahn, The Oregonian)

Sure, Brandon Thomas says, he has something to prove Saturday night in the **Les Schwab Bowl** all-star high school football game at Hillsboro Stadium.

A late bloomer at **West Linn**, the 6-foot-4, 310-pound Thomas wants to show how far he has come as an offensive lineman, and how serious he is about walking on and earning a scholarship at **Oregon**.

"I just want to show that I can hang with the best of them, and prove that where I'm going is where I should be," Thomas said.

But what really drives Thomas will be sitting in the stands.

Brad Thomas, Brandon's father, has been undergoing treatment for skin cancer for four years. His doctors didn't expect him to make it this long, but he has defied the odds, drawing inspiration from his wife and four children -- and from watching Brandon Thomas play football.

Les Schwab Bowl

What: All-star football game for graduated seniors from Class 6A and 5A schools

Who: [Complete rosters](#)

When, where: 6 p.m. Saturday, Hillsboro Stadium

On the air: Radio on KXTG (95.5)

Tickets: Available [online](#) or at Hillsboro Stadium on game day

Benefit: Game proceeds benefit the Oregon Athletic Coaches Association general scholarship fund and Oregon's Class 6A and 5A schools.

"It really helps lift my spirits," Brad Thomas said. "It's a real joy for me. It keeps me going, to be honest. It's been very inspirational for all of us to see his progression."

Likewise, Brad Thomas -- who has undergone more than 100 surgeries to remove cancerous tissue -- has inspired his son to rebound from a rocky start in high school to graduate, earn **Class 6A all-state honorable mention** at tackle and pursue his goal of playing college football.

"Watching him battle through each day is what has kept me going," Brandon Thomas said. "Just to never give up, like my dad hasn't. The thing that's helped me is, he hasn't given up, so why should I?"

Digging out of a hole

Despite his size, Brandon Thomas didn't play in West Linn's youth football program. He decided to give the sport a try as a

6-2, 250-pound freshman, though, in part because his friends were playing.

He was strong, often lifting weights with his father, a former high school lineman at Barlow. And he had unusual speed and agility for his size.

After his father's diagnosis in 2006, however, Thomas went into a funk.

"He really went in the toilet," Brad Thomas said. "He had quite the struggle, to say the least. They didn't know how long I'd make it, or if I'd lose one, if not both, of my legs."

Brandon Thomas' mind wandered in class, and he failed all of his classes, except for earning one D, in his first semester at West Linn. In football, he languished on the freshman B team.

"My overall mentality on everything just kind of went downhill," he said.

He went to summer school, and to classes before and after school, to gain eligibility as a sophomore. But he continued to struggle in football and was a backup on the junior varsity.

"His sophomore year, when he started working out with the varsity, we saw the potential in the kid," West Linn coach Ron Chappell said. "But his heart just wasn't there, his focus wasn't there, and it shouldn't have been. His focus was on his family and his dad. His sophomore year, I wasn't sure if he was going to make it or not."

That's when Thomas said he "came to a self-realization that something had to change."

He turned to West Linn line coach Sai Poulivaati, a former defensive tackle at **Oregon State** in the early 1990s and in the Arena Football League. Thomas told Poulivaati he wanted to play on varsity as a junior and asked the coach to