

September 5, 2010

Thomas was a driving force for Buffalo Public Schools' athletes

Former AD heads into retirement knowing he helped improve the district's athletic profile

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Dave Thomas had a long list of accomplishments while working for Buffalo's public schools. Photo by James P. McCoy

Dave Thomas had a singular, ambitious vision as athletic director for the Buffalo schools. He wanted to create a level playing field for the city athletes. Thomas told anyone who would listen. OK, so a lot of people nodded their heads and dismissed the guy as a crazy dreamer.

Level playing field? In many cases, there was no field at all for the city athletes. Or some decrepit shell of a facility -- like All High Stadium -- that less optimistic officials would like to see torn down. How can you balance the playing field without the resources, the money, the political will?

People weren't exactly clamoring for the job when Thomas became the AD in the mid-1990s. It was a thankless position, being in charge of a city's entire sports program. The program was in

disarray, with old uniforms, no feeder programs, bad and non-existent fields. Worst of all was the painful reality that city athletes were made to feel like second-class citizens.

Well, the field isn't totally level today. But look around the city and you'll see the expression of Thomas' vision: players with matching uniforms; junior varsity programs; the restoration of All High; a renovated Johnnie B. Wiley Stadium; a baseball partnership with New Era and the Bisons; new gymnasiums at South Park and Hutch Tech; a new eight-lane pool; and gym at City Honors.

This weekend, the city football program entered a new era as part of Section VI. Riverside High hosted its first game at the new football stadium, complete with a spacious press box.

There were, of course, many people who made it happen. It took millions in capital improvement dollars to make the upgrades possible. Thomas gives much of the credit to Dr. James Williams, who pushed the sports improvements forward when he arrived in Buffalo as superintendent five years ago. In Williams' first two years, the sports budget jumped from \$750,000 to \$1.3 million. He raised close to another million through his personal foundation.

But it was Thomas who saw the grim reality and imagined the possibilities. A few months after his retirement, and 15 years after taking on the job, Thomas takes great satisfaction in what was done for Buffalo high school athletes on his watch.

"I don't like to talk about myself, but yeah, it feels good," Thomas said early this week. "And I enjoyed it. It was my job. I got up every day and went to work happy. I tried to do the best I could do, in a short period of time. The field may not be completely level right now, but it's closer than it's ever been."

Thomas, 66, worked for 44 years in the city schools as a teacher, coach and athletic director. He actually considered leaving five years ago. His wife, Pat, was a city principal. It's not like he needed the money. But Williams revitalized him. His new boss was stunned by the dysfunctional state of the sports program. Williams had the personality and will to ram through many of the changes that had been percolating in Thomas' mind for years.

In many ways, Thomas was the perfect complement to Williams, a blustering, bombastic figure who effected change with the force of his personality. Thomas was the self-effacing servant who whispered in his boss's ear and stepped to the side when Williams strode to the microphones to take credit.

"He was always good to me," Thomas said of Williams. "I was on the hot seat. But he told me he was going to do it, and he got the funding and did it. He put every kid in a brand-new uniform, made them feel good. And they play better when they feel good. He matched up athletics with school work, which is very important to him."

Thomas had his critics. It's hard to please everyone when you're responsible for 15 high schools and nearly 75 middle and elementary schools. People expected him to be everywhere at once. Some felt he should have done more for girls' sports. Someone once told Keith McShea, The News' high school writer, that McShea had the toughest job in high school sports. "No," McShea said, "Dave Thomas has the toughest job in high school sports."

Williams and Thomas didn't always see eye-to-eye, though Thomas said the boss's door was always open (which rankled some other city big shots). Thomas was not in favor of putting all the city football teams into sectional play at once. He wanted it done in phases. Thomas felt some of the teams weren't physically ready, and the kids might suffer.

It was always about the kids. Thomas loved being there for children. He loved people, period. Whoever it was -- a coach, a janitor or a volleyball player -- he wanted them all to know they were important, and that the system cared about them.

Jim Duggan, a former English teacher at City Honors, has known Thomas since his early days at School 33 in the old First Ward. Duggan was the presenter when Thomas went into the Kenmore West Hall of Fame three years ago. Thomas was a tennis star at Kenmore West and earned a scholarship to Bradley University. The more Duggan talked to people, the more amazed he was at how many people Thomas had touched along the way.

"From custodians to kings, they all knew him," Duggan said.

Last week, Thomas took a tour of Riverside and City Honors to check on the new facilities. He was retired now, but you would have thought he was still the AD. He stopped to point out little flaws in the construction. That fence at Riverside, it's too close to the field. Kids might get hurt. Teachers, coaches and principals stopped to reminisce, to congratulate him on his retirement, to thank him.

Mike Mogavero is the principal at Riverside. His father, Nick, spent years as a coach in the city and spent time as AD before Thomas took over. Mike knew what Thomas was up against.

"He just knew the right thing to do and say all the time," Mogavero said. "If you called him, he would be right there. He was very kind to the kids, very accessible. He made a lot of visits to the schools. Of course, you always had to have lunch ready for him."

"Come on," Thomas said, "tell him about the times I yelled at you."

"Oh, he would straighten you out," Mogavero said with a laugh.

Thomas wanted it done right. There was too much at stake for the city kids. People associate him with the major sports, with football and basketball. But Thomas had a soft spot for the minor sports. He pushed for a revival in baseball. The soccer program was a shambles when he took over. Thomas felt the most popular sport in the world should thrive in a city that has become a cultural melting pot.

One of Thomas' first acts as AD was hiring a gym teacher named Telly Forcucci, who was also a soccer coach. Five years ago, Thomas put him at Grover Cleveland, which had a budding population of promising soccer players. The city got them new spikes and matching uniforms. Last fall, Grover won the sectional Class B title and went all the way to the state semifinals, using 20 players from 14 different countries.

"It used to be a sport no one cared about," Forcucci said. "We never had shin guards, or spikes. All we had was a net and a couple of balls. Now we're considered a sport just like everybody else, and it's because of him. He was always there. During our run, he made the trips. He loved the kids and that they represented the city well. We might be a little rough around the edges, but we handled ourselves with respect, and we had matching uniforms."

When Thomas showed up on the sidelines at Grover Cleveland games, players would walk up to him and say, "Hi, Mr. Thomas. Thanks for the uniforms."

"They all knew him," Forcucci said. "They knew. I told them, 'This is the gentleman who got you those spikes, those uniforms. This is the reason you played.' It'll be weird not seeing him at the games, making sure everything is going OK. But we're in a better place now. His fingerprints are all over the City of Buffalo, without a doubt."