

Thomas' rise to the top

Thomas helped turn Taylor golf into a contender

By MARKUS MILLER



Senior Maddie Thomas leaves Taylor women's golf with a legacy of success. (Photograph provided by Cam Andry)

Golf is a fickle sport. A tiny, nearly microscopic hitch in a golf swing can be the difference between the perfect shot and a shot that floats out of bounds.

Because of the detail-orientated nature of the sport, practice time is valuable and golfers often start early in their lives. As the saying goes: time is money, and in golf, time is better scores.

For senior Maddie Thomas, the opposite may be true. Thomas didn't get her start in golf until her freshman year of high school.

"I had never picked up a club until, literally, the day before tryouts," Thomas said. "I went out and bought a set, and then showed up the next day for tryouts to play my freshman year. It was just for fun, I was not good at all."

That all changed quickly.

During her sophomore year, Thomas caught what she calls, "the bug." That's when the lessons started, and that's when the improvement came.

Still, college golf seemed like a longshot. But, with her competitive nature and the help of those around her, Thomas continued to improve and focus on a sport that she had just played for the first time two years earlier.

"My dad helped me get into bigger tournaments," Thomas said. "I needed it, because I vividly remember two tournaments where I was probably the worst golfer there. They were pretty big tournaments. I had no business playing in them. But it showed me that I did compete with girls who were incredible golfers."

The two tournaments Thomas recalled happen to be played at Penn State University and Clemson University.

While the endings to the two tournaments may not have been ideal at the time, they helped mold her into the golfer she is today.

"I saw those golfers and wanted to be just as good as them," she said. "I left both of (those tournaments) in tears because I was so frustrated, but they were

turning points for me. My dad pushed me in a sense of believing in myself. He was the one that was there at the end to encourage me to keep going.”

Slowly, the milestones started coming in. First, it was breaking 100, then it was breaking 90. Then it was breaking 80 and shooting in the 70s, something only the best high school golfers can do.

Her senior year came, and the love for the sport continued to grow. Thomas went from trying-out for a sport she had never played, to looking for a college to play said sport in less than three years.

That’s when she found Taylor, a school that filled both of the things she wanted from her next step in life: a Christian school and a golf team.

“Maddie is, without a doubt, one of the greatest competitors I’ve had a chance to coach,” said Head Golf Coach Cameron Andry.

Thomas joined a young program at Taylor in 2016. The Trojan women’s golf team started in 2012, and Andry was in his first year as head coach in 2016.

While improvement was being made within the program, the team hadn’t finished better than No. 5 in the Crossroads League Championship heading into the 2016-17 season. Thomas, a freshman, helped propel the program to new heights.

“Maddie had a very solid freshman season, but I saw her rise to a different level at the end of her freshman campaign,” Andry said.

Thomas tied the TU 18-hole record earlier in the year with a score of 71, and then in the week before the Crossroads Championship she led the team to a come-from-behind win on the second day of the Rock Hollow Invitational. The team went into the final day of the Rock Hollow Invitational in fourth place, but finished first.

Then, they pulled off a similar feat in the Crossroads Championship. Thomas went 78-79-80 in rough conditions over the three-round event to finish No. 2 individually and lead the No. 50 NAIA-ranked Trojans to a surprise conference title.



The 2018-19 Taylor women’s golf team after their third consecutive Crossroads League title. (Photograph provided by Cam Andry)

The team would then move onto the national tournament, an experience that helped shape the team’s future.

“I think as a team, we were so shocked and amazed to be there,” said senior golfer Annie Stimmel. “I’m not sure if we were still in a ‘winning’ mentality, but Maddie was.”

Thomas wrapped up her freshman season by making the cut at the national tournament as an individual and finishing No. 39. She also won Crossroads League Freshman of the Year.

Her performance and the team's performance in the Crossroads League championship and nationals helped build the foundation for the team's success in the years following.

"That team was so special and really catapulted our program on a championship trajectory," Andry said.

Taylor women's golf and Thomas didn't look back after their first Crossroads title, and won the next two conference championships while finishing fifth at the 2018 National Championships.

Everything seemed lined up for a program-defining 2019-20 season. TU had two All-Americans in Thomas and junior Nicole Jung returning, as well as two All-Crossroads League performers in junior Taylor French and Stimmel returning.

The fall season got off to a strong start, and Taylor won the Whistling Straits Championship over No. 1 ranked Keiser University. Thomas had possibly the most impressive performance of her career when she fired a 78 and 76 in what Andry called the most brutal conditions the team had ever played. The two-day score of 154 was enough for a 10-shot individual victory for Thomas.

"After my junior year I wanted to take my last season and improve as much as I can," Thomas said. "I got a new swing coach and worked extremely hard over the summer."

The results were obvious, and Thomas had dropped her scoring average from 78.18 to 75.22. She also won the Forester Fall Classic, and after a top-5 finish in the February NAIA ChampionsGate Invitational, seemed well on her way to another All-American season. And, the team, ranked No. 4 in the NAIA, was competing with and defeating other top collegiate talent.

Then, the season was cancelled and their national championship aspirations disappeared.

"It was very very hard for everyone," Thomas said. "This group of girls have been together for a long time. So this was going to be our year, our best shot at nationals. There was a lot of disappointment, and we're still working through that. But I just come back to the understanding that God is in control and his plans are greater than ours."

Stimmel recalled a story where she, Thomas, senior Alexis Harris and senior Lauren Murphy were put together in a group for their final practice before COVID-19 sent them home.

The four seniors were given one last chance to play together in what, according to Stimmel, was an emotional practice round.

While it may not have ended the way anyone hoped, Thomas' career at Taylor was special. She helped lead the team into championship contention, then became a fixture in a lineup that consistently found itself at the top of NAIA polls and leaderboards.

"She sets the bar high," Stimmel said. "She has the same steady, confident, determined mindset every time she plays golf. This consistency is not only on the course, but who she is as a teammate and a friend. She is generous with her time and is always there for you. I am blessed and so thankful to call her my friend."

Andry said Thomas' care for her teammates and daily approach as a teammate and leader is a large reason for the team's rise through the years.

Thomas said she never would have expected coming in as a freshman for some of her teammates to become lifelong friends, and that what she'll remember first

about her career is her friendships and relationship with Andry.

Still, she admits that the opportunity to compete at the sport she loved is a close second.

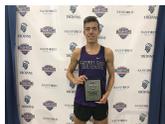
Now, she'll move forward to her next steps in life. While Taylor golf may not always be a part of her life, she says she'll forever remain grateful to the school and team.

"I'm so glad that my freshman year of high school I decided it would just be fun to go out and play, because it got me here and gave me so many good friends and great experiences," Thomas said.

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