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TOP STORY

WKU SOFTBALL

Hilltoppers' Thomas plays unique role as left-handed 2B

Sophomore enjoying another strong season after switching positions

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Jordan Thomas gets some curious looks when she takes the field for Western Kentucky.

Thomas isn't surprised. She said it's "really rare" for a left-handed athlete like herself to play second base.

"I've had several umpires come up to me and be like, 'Are you supposed to be playing second base?' " Thomas told the Daily News on Tuesday.

"Several people have reached second base and been like, 'Have you always played infield?' I'm like, 'No, this is definitely new this year.' "

Thomas came to WKU as an outfielder out of Bethlehem High School. A surplus of outfielders and a need for infielders led coach Amy Tudor to shift the lefty to second base.

"I never foresaw that in any of the recruiting," Tudor said. "But she's athletic. I knew she could do it. We asked her and talked to her. She goes, 'Yeah, I'm up for it.' That's just kind of who she is as a person."

Thomas has been one of the stars this season for a Hilltopper team that leads Conference USA's East Division.

So far as a sophomore, Thomas has started all 38 games. She hits .298, reaches base at a .372 clip and posts a .562 slugging percentage from her leadoff spot.

“Her ability to be even-keeled at the plate helps us as a squad just because the leadoff has to be that way,” Tudor said. “It can’t be up and down emotionally. She does a really good job of that.”

Thomas has smacked seven home runs this season, three of which came in a crucial series win over the weekend against North Texas. She’s also tallied 26 runs batted in, 25 runs scored and seven doubles.

“Just hitting anything for power is nice, being the one to set that tone for us,” Thomas said. “I think it’s a big game changer.”

WKU is 29-9 overall entering a 4 p.m. matchup Wednesday at Tennessee Tech. The Toppers are 12-3 in league play and lead the East by 2½ games over second-place Middle Tennessee (25-18, 9-5), who they’ll face on the road Friday and Saturday in a three-game series.

Tudor’s squad is coming off a weekend where it took two of three from C-USA West Division contender North Texas (26-15, 11-4). Thomas earned C-USA Player of the Week honors Monday for her play against the Mean Green.

“Just from the beginning, we saw our talent,” Thomas said. “We knew that we could come out on top of the conference if we just stayed focused and all had the same common goal.”

Thomas has competed at a high level across different sports during her career.

She started out as a competitive swimmer and said that at one point, she earned an invite to the Junior Olympics in Colorado.

Those 5 a.m. alarms for early-morning swim practices wore on Thomas, she said, and she turned her attention toward basketball and softball.

Thomas, a Lebanon native, started her sports career at Marion County High School as a middle schooler. She was an eighth-grade guard in 2013 on a Lady Knights team that went 39-0 and won a state title at E.A. Diddle Arena behind future Division I players Makayla Epps and Kyvin Goodin-Rogers.

“I had a blast,” Thomas said of that season. “We didn’t lose at all.”

As Thomas started high school, she turned her full attention to softball, which she said was the sport she enjoyed the most. She transferred from Marion County to Bethlehem, where she became an All-Region 5 and all-state player.

Tudor recruited Thomas to WKU and immediately made the 5-foot-5 outfielder her leadoff hitter.

“She was smaller, but she just competed,” Tudor said of Thomas. “... I was like, ‘This kid is tough.’ You can’t teach toughness. You’ve either got it or you don’t.”

Thomas was a C-USA All-Freshman Team member in 2018. She led the Hilltoppers in runs scored (42), hits (51), doubles (16), triples (three), total bases (91), slugging percentage (.565), walks (40), on-base percentage (.454) and OPS (1.019).

Those impressive hitting numbers have carried into the 2019 campaign. Thomas’ performance at second base has also been important for WKU.

Thomas has posted a .968 fielding percentage and has only committed three errors this season. As a team, the Tops have made 27 errors, fewest among all 12 Conference USA programs.

“Double plays are a tough challenge for me and (Morgan McElroy), our shortstop, to turn,” Thomas said of playing her position as a lefty. “Other than that, I just try to make it work.

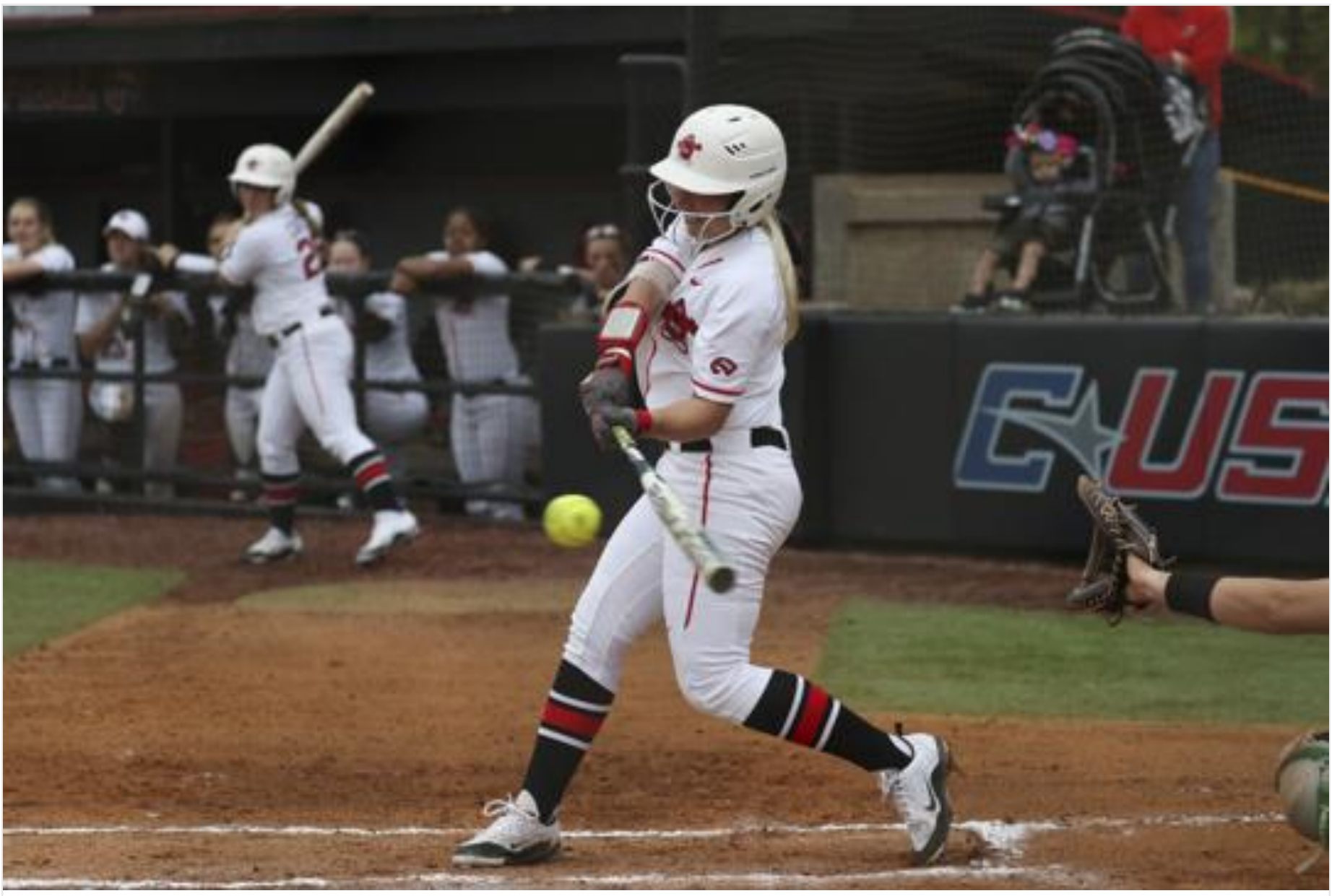
“Coach (Jessica Twaddle), our infield coach, works with me on my footwork and different feeds I have to do to get the ball to first or second a lot quicker.”

Thomas' efforts at the plate and willingness to take on a challenging new spot in the field have been key reasons WKU sits first in C-USA, Tudor said.

"We have a thing on the team, 'Just be the best you can be at your position,' " Thomas said. "So that's just what I've been trying to do this year."

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