





f l a m e t h r o w e r

Chelsea Thomas, Missouri's indomitable ace since 2009, brings the heat to the softball diamond. Now the redshirt senior — and one of the greatest team-sport athletes in Mizzou history — looks to ignite another Women's College World Series run. **STORY BY MARCUS WILKINS** & **ILLUSTRATIONS BY CHUCK ANDERSON**

Softball.

The irony of the sport's name isn't lost on apprehensive, knock-kneed hitters.

When Chelsea Thomas glares toward the plate, ominously palming the sphere from 43 feet away, batters are lucky to register a glimpse of yellow and a leathery explosion as tardy aluminum slices through chalk dust.

For a Mizzou career record 942 strikeout victims, at-bats have ended similarly against the Tigers' incomparable ace. The Thomas arsenal: drop ball, rise ball, speeds in excess of 70 mph — the mathematical equivalent of a major leaguer throwing 100-plus from 60 feet 6 inches away — and a signature changeup that fools even the canniest of veterans as it floats across at 45 mph.

Thomas' reputation as a fierce hurler has earned her two consecutive Big 12 Pitcher of the Year awards, back-to-back first team All-American honors, and spots on Team USA in 2011 and 2012. She holds Mizzou records for career no-hitters (11), strikeouts and wins in a season (397 and 32 in 2011) and could overtake the career wins, innings pitched and complete-games categories by the end of her senior season that began Feb. 13.

The disparity between that cold-blooded competitor's visage and her mild-mannered personality adds to the contrast. Coaches, teammates and family describe her as kind, studious, polite, friendly, funny and sweet. In Thomas' world, to know her is to love her.

Try to remember that as she heartlessly mows down SEC opponents in 2013.

Mizzou head Coach Ehren Earleywine was understandably skeptical when he heard about a hard-throwing righty from Pleasantville, Iowa. Rich Thomas — Chelsea's father and coach — had submitted a self-produced recruiting video of his daughter in 2006, but the experienced Earleywine knows parents are prone to exaggeration.

"The video was grainy, you couldn't see her mechanics, and you couldn't tell if the ball was moving," Earleywine says. "You could just hear this real loud thump every time it hit the catcher's mitt. It's one you become familiar with when you coach."

Earleywine didn't usually make recruiting visits during the softball season, but he made an ex-

ception for Thomas in 2008. The coach grabbed his radar gun and drove toward the rolling cornfields made famous by *Field of Dreams*.

During the pitching session, the 18-year-old's first three tosses registered 70, 71 and 68 mph before Earleywine politely excused himself to fix what had to be an equipment malfunction. A typical women's college fastball zips in at 60 to 65 mph.

"I'm banging this calibrator against a tree, which is what you're supposed to do to get it to vibrate, then I went back and said, 'Go ahead and cut loose.'" Earleywine says. "The next pitch was 73 mph. I knew right then I had a chance to be a pretty good coach."

In her hometown of 1,694, Thomas already had a reputation for velocity. Wary opposing Little League coaches would ask to see her birth certificate, and one even pulled his team off the field.

"[My pitching] was a little wild those days, and I would cry when I hit people because I felt so bad," Thomas says. "I had to get over that quickly. My dad and I were learning together, and I never wanted to put the ball down."

After accepting Mizzou's scholarship offer, Thomas burst onto center stage her freshman year in 2009. In her first career start, she recorded a complete game, one-hit shutout to beat Virginia Tech. She followed that with a pair of no-hitters against Southeast Missouri State. That season she held opponents to a league-best .185 batting average, stymied No. 1 seeded UCLA at the NCAA Super Regional in Los Angeles and led the Tigers to their first Women's College World Series appearance in 15 years.

"Nobody really knew about her, and all of a sudden, there was this dominant pitcher," says Michele Smith, ESPN analyst and two-time Olympic gold-winning softball pitcher. "The best pitchers have a snarl and a game face, and you can see that with Chelsea. When she doesn't get to where she thinks she needs to be, the dial turns a little bit, and you see that intensity and that focus. It's almost scary — which is good."

Then, in 2010, a stress fracture in her pitching arm stalled her meteoric career after a school-record setting 12-1 start. Days before conference play began against rival Oklahoma, Earleywine, Thomas and her family decided to shut down her season and seek a medical redshirt.

"The doctors said, 'If you keep throwing, it's probably going to break completely, and we'll have to do surgery,'" says Thomas, who had played the NCAA's maximum number of games to still qualify for the redshirt. "I learned a lot that season in the dugout and behind the scenes listening to the coaches."

Mizzou surprised experts by returning to the WCWS in 2010 with pitcher Kristin Nottelmann filling in, but the Tigers didn't record a World Series



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game victory until a third consecutive trip in 2011.

Back in the circle, Thomas and the Tigers eliminated the Sooners, then clashed in a classic pitchers’ duel against Baylor and Whitney Canyon. The Mizzou star struck out 19 — the second most in series history — but allowed a solo home run in the bottom of the 13th for a 1-0 loss.

“I was so locked in, I didn’t even realize what inning it was,” says Thomas, still visibly disappointed. “I wasn’t ready to go home.”

The Tigers’ bid for a fourth consecutive WCWS in 2012 fell short when they dropped a Super Regional series to future SEC foe Louisiana State in Columbia. Thomas’ junior year was typical — for her. She posted a 27-9 record and a top 10 finish nationally in ERA, strikeouts per seven innings and hits allowed.

Thomas’ focus translates to academics, too. She is closing in on a bachelor’s degree in biology

while pursuing a master’s in positive coaching through Mizzou Online.

“On the field, Chelsea rarely laughs unless we absolutely force it out of her,” says former teammate and catcher Cat Lee, BGS ’11. “We give her a lot of grief for being from *Pleasantville*, Iowa, but she definitely lives up to the hype.”

Like most Mizzou sports, the softball program can expect fierce competition, warm weather and wild fans in the SEC. It can also expect one of the conference’s top pitchers in the circle for the Tigers as she stares down a new cast of opposing hitters, most of whom haven’t seen Thomas’ stuff.

“Everyone keeps saying the competition will be so much better, but I think it will be about the same,” says Thomas with a knowing smile. “I think it will be cool to win two different conference championships in one career.” **M**