

# She's got heart

Fans flock to see former UConn star shooting guard in Madison

By Lisa Reisman  
Special to the Times 4/17/09

The pigtailed girls hung on to her every word. Their idol, former UConn Husky Mel Thomas, was holding court in a manner of speaking.

"When you're young, don't believe anyone who says you can't do what you dream of doing," the former star shooting guard told a packed house at R.J. Julia Booksellers on Monday night.

"Just look at me," the slender five-foot-nine Thomas continued with her characteristic bright smile. "Do I look like a basketball player?"

In her inspiring new book "Heart of a Husky," which she was in Madison to promote, the 2006-2008 co-captain recounts the dirty plays and hard fouls that she endured as a standout hoopster growing up in Cincinnati. She laughed them off. "They couldn't do anything to me that I hadn't already done to myself. My grueling hours and hours of training prepared me for anything they threw at me."

That very tenacity might explain how the UConn women shredded the University of Louisville 76-54 in the national championship game last Tuesday. To be sure, Thomas' book chronicles the Huskies' pursuit of the title during last year's season, which ended in a devastating loss to Stanford in the Final Four. And yet it provides just as much insight into the makings of the 2008-09 team that's generally regarded as among the best in women's college basketball history. Indeed, to judge by the enthusiastic reception of the standing-room-only crowd, no one, save perhaps senior guard Renee Montgomery, has personified the program more than fan favorite Thomas.

Much like this year's corps, Mel Thomas was a player for whom there was no such thing as an inconsequential possession. She fought and scratched for every ball, diving on the floor, into chairs, under press tables, and into masses of humanity. Each time she rose to her feet, dusted herself off, and charged to the other end of the floor to get involved in the next play. As a three-time Big East Academic All-Star, she was equally dominant in the classroom.

That kind of intensity, given the scrappiness she displayed as a youth, was just part of her DNA, one might assume. In fact, as she told the rapt audience, it wasn't until she confronted the impossibly high standards set by Geno Auriemma and his coaching staff with her 2004 arrival in Storrs that her seemingly unshakable willpower was tested.

Not that she hadn't been warned. Unlike

other coaches, Auriemma didn't show up at her Cincinnati home dressed up as a mascot or bearing a team jersey or a diploma with her name on it in an effort to whet her interest. He didn't promise that she'd be a star or even that she'd be a starter.

The famously brash Auriemma plunked himself on the couch, propped his feet on the table and, as Thomas puts it, "drank all our wine." Along the way, he mentioned that his team worked harder than every other team in the country, and that's why they won. "If you want to be part of that," the man known as Coach told the high-school senior, "then come. If you don't, then don't come."

Of course, Coach's expectations went far beyond punishing three-hour workouts. Asked by Joey Milner of Madison to name the one thing she'd remember for the rest of her life, she told the story of a practice in her freshman year when no one could do anything right. According to Thomas, Coach "threw up his hands and asked the team why they didn't just go home and kill themselves." None of the players took him seriously. If anything, they "all had a pretty good laugh about it when they got back to the dorm."

Coach Auriemma, Thomas would come to recognize, "does everything for a purpose, and that's to make everyone mentally tougher, and to make the team the best it can be." One day at practice, one of the players incurred his disfavor when she was unable to tell him the number of brothers and sisters of another teammate. "This is your family," she remembers him saying, "the people you trust with your life. You better know every single person inside and out."

She was initially resistant to Auriemma's strict demands and even stricter system: "You're used to doing things your own way and then you have to adjust to their system and that was tough," she admitted. But

Thomas, along with most of the team, gradually bought into his philosophy, learning to pick each other up — and not only on the court.

Last year, after three years without a championship, an eternity for UConn women fans, "we had all the pieces," she told the crowd. During a pre-season long-distance training run, each of the players came in one by one until only forward Kaili McLaren was left on the course. "We do everything as a team," she writes, "so everyone jogged back to finish the run with Kaili."

Unhappily, not even the stoutest support from teammates, the development of the most exacting execution in practice, or the grittiest performances on the court could prevent what Thomas terms her "twist of fate." On a drive to the basket with just over two minutes remaining in what would be a dramatic six-point win at Syracuse on Jan. 15, 2008, UConn's top three-point and free-throw shooter felt her right foot go in one direction and her right knee in another. An MRI showed an ACL tear. Just like that, Thomas' college career was over and, with an injury sustained earlier that season by starting for-



"Just look at me," the slender five-foot-nine Thomas continued with characteristic bright smile. "Do I look like a basketball player?"

ward Kalana Greene, the Huskies' quest for a title in jeopardy.

"When I took off my jersey that night I was sobbing," said the former number 25, who had spoken of the pride that rushed through her when she first stepped into a game with UConn emblazoned on her jersey.

"You finally get out of the preseason, and the practices, and it's just the greatest feeling in the world. You feel as though you're part of something larger than yourself."

Which is precisely the family atmosphere that Auriemma, for all his apparent prickliness, has instilled since he came to UConn in 1985, and it's not just the habitual dinners for the team at his household.

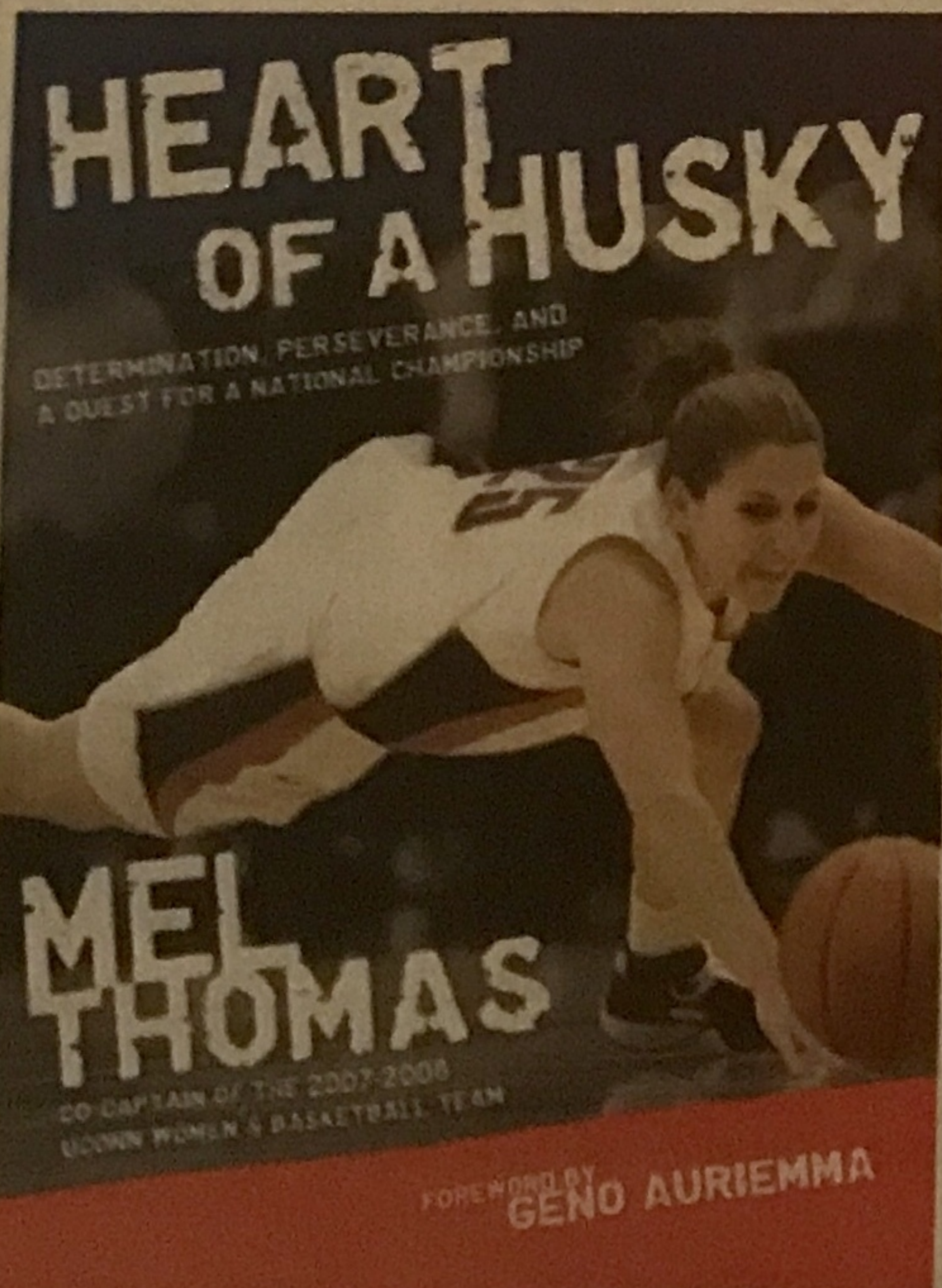
"You have relationships with all the players who have been through the program," the 22-year-old told the audience "and because you've all been through it, you almost feel as if you played with them."

It's no different with the current squad, it seems. "I think they realized how close we came last year," said Thomas who recently greeted the newly-minted champions with huge hugs. "And from the beginning of the year they said it's not going to happen again, we're going to go all the way."

As for Thomas herself, she's fully recovered from the knee injury and played professionally in Ireland over the winter, leading her team to an undefeated season.

In May, she's off to Seattle, where she's been invited to tryouts with the WNBA's Storm.

"I know I have my work cut out for me, but I'm excited for the challenge," she said. In case anyone is wondering, she's as fearless as ever. Her first game in Ireland, she reportedly dove onto the court 12 times.



Mel Thomas wowed the crowd in Madison as part of her book tour.