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## **'I'm blessed' - For Westview football player Malik Thomas, this was a joyous Christmas as the sophomore continues to recover from a serious neck injury**

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MARTIN - Unlike every other Christmas he had celebrated in his life, Malik Thomas woke up Monday surprisingly content, fulfilled and satisfied.

Nothing under the Christmas tree could top what he had already received this year, so Santa Claus definitely had his work cut out this time around.

"So far the best Christmas present I've gotten is getting out of my halo and getting my neck brace off," Thomas said, with a huge grin.

The memories of how Thomas - a 15-year-old sophomore football player at Westview High School - first ended up in a halo and later a neck brace still haunt him. His mother, Ladana Woolridge, tears up whenever she thinks back on everything that has happened to her son.

This story started on Aug. 19 when the Westview football team was playing Camden in a Week 0 game at Hardy M. Graham Stadium on the University of Tennessee Martin campus.

It was late in the second quarter of a scoreless game when Thomas was tackled. After the hard-hitting play, Thomas tried to get up and return to the huddle, but he immediately fell back to the ground.

Something was wrong.

Westview's head coach Don Coady, athletic director Rusty Taylor and team physical therapist Brian Smith were the first to reach Thomas on the field. His mother soon followed.

"They asked me what was hurting and I told them it was my neck," said Thomas, who had rushed for a game-high 61 yards on eight carries before being injured. "They asked if I could feel them touching my shoulders and I told them it was tingling. It felt like pins were poking me through my chest."

Thomas remained motionless on the field for nearly 20 minutes before he was placed on a stretcher, loaded into an ambulance and driven to Volunteer Community Hospital in Martin.

"At the time we really thought we were doing all that as a precaution," said Smith, who owns Sideline Physical Therapy in Martin. "We all noticed the impact of the hit and the way that he landed. What really concerned us was that he didn't move after he fell back to the ground."

After Thomas was taken to the hospital, doctors realized Thomas had feeling in all of his limbs and was not paralyzed. Thomas, though, had chipped his C1 vertebra and cracked both sides of his C2 vertebra. Those two vertebrae allow a person to turn their head from side to side. The C1 vertebra also connects the skull to the cervical spine.

Thomas was then airlifted to Vanderbilt Children's Hospital in Nashville later that night. While Thomas arrived in Nashville in 55 minutes, it took his mother 2 1/2 hours to finally reach the hospital.

By 7 the next morning, Dr. Gregory Mencio decided Thomas didn't need surgery. Instead, Dr. Mencio drilled four pins into Thomas' skull to secure a halo and immobilize his head. The halo is a circular device situated around the head and held in place by four graphite rods - one on each side of the face and two in the back of the head. The rods are attached to a chest brace, which helps stabilize the neck.

Doctors hoped the damaged vertebrae would fuse together if his head was kept completely stable. The plan was for Thomas to wear the halo for eight weeks.

After spending four days in the hospital, Thomas was released and allowed to return to Martin. Waiting for him in his front yard were a group of cheering supporters.

"As we turned the corner onto our street, we could see his football family was in the front yard clapping and smiling, holding posters and signs. There were posters and balloons all over the yard and porch," Woolridge said. "They helped me get him out of the car and get into the house. Some of them looked sad, but Malik told them he was going to be OK."

More and more every day, that proves to be true. By Nov. 16, Thomas had made enough progress that his halo was removed.

Thomas returned to the doctor on Dec. 14 and received more good news: He didn't have to wear his neck collar around the house, wouldn't need surgery, could start physical therapy and could return to school in January (Thomas was working with a home-bound teacher since being released from the hospital in August).

Although on his last doctor's visit he felt a slight pull in the back of his neck whenever he looked down, Thomas appears to be making more progress.

"It looks like the gap (between the C1 and C2 vertebrae) is trying to fill in (with bone)," Dr. Mencio said, "and when he flexes and extends (his neck) there's no gapping or movement in there. I think that's all good signs."

"I'd like to see more bone actually filling in that gap - and I think over time we will see that - but we may not and may still end up having to do something down the road."

Thomas, his mother and his aunt, Joyce Hooker, all displayed smiles and relief after hearing he didn't need surgery. Thomas smiled and appreciated the good news after going through some incredibly rough times.

"He said right after his accident that the first thing he wanted to do after he got out of the neck brace was go to Applebee's," Hooker said, "so we're going to Applebee's."

Thomas started his rehabilitation last week. For two to three times a week for the next six weeks, Thomas will work with Smith at Sideline Physical Therapy strengthening his neck, upper back and shoulders. Over time Thomas should regain mobility in his neck.

His next doctor's appointment is scheduled for Jan. 25 in Nashville. There's no telling when - or if - doctors will say whether Thomas will ever play football again.

And although he wants to play football again, Thomas just hopes to continue making progress in his rehab.

"At first I thought about playing football a lot, but now I'm just focusing on getting better," Thomas said. "It wouldn't be hard (if I couldn't play football again), but I'll try to go and play another sport then. I just thank God he gave me a chance to still be here.

"I don't look too far ahead. I just take it a day at a time and see what happens. I'm blessed."

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