

Demaryius Thomas, Bulls' Jimmy Butler form indelible bond

A similar background and path to their current standing as sports stars has brought Demaryius Thomas and Bulls forward Jimmy Butler together to form an unlikely bond.



What brought NBA All-Star and Chicago Bulls forward Jimmy Butler to Denver for the Broncos' season opener seemed unclear.

A Texas native who has resided in the Midwest since his years at Marquette University, Butler doesn't appear to have geographical ties to the area, and a quick search through his social media didn't reveal any previous mentions of the Broncos. As Butler stood on the sideline during pregame warmups in his [Demaryius Thomas](#) jersey, it simply looked like another example of a professional athlete wanting to experience what the Broncos bring on game days.

And while that may have been partially true, why Butler really came to Denver goes well beyond the surface. A deep-seated connection between

Butler and Thomas has tied the two together and formed a bond that affirms the defining drive behind their success.

The Bulls star first reached out in November after [reading about Thomas' childhood](#) in which his mother and grandmother were arrested and sentenced to 20 years and life in prison, respectively. At 11 years old, Thomas was separated from his mother and in spite of the massive hardship that he shouldered, [he triumphed in climbing to the NFL and becoming one of the league's top receivers](#).

The story impressed and moved Butler, but more than that, he was struck by how closely Thomas' path resembled his own.

Butler too had grown up without his mother on circumstances outside of his control. She had told him, ["I don't like the look of you. You gotta go,"](#) and at 13 years old, Butler was homeless. He found a friend whose family accepted him, and after short stays with them, he was invited to stay for good.

Eventually he became a respected junior-college prospect, was recruited by Marquette and after impressive junior and senior seasons, Butler made the jump to the NBA. In 2014-15, Butler had his breakthrough season, collecting the NBA's 2015 Most Improved Player award, his first All-Star nod and his second All-Defense Second Team selection.

Butler saw a lot of himself in Thomas' story, and he knew exactly how rare that was.

"It's just how all the odds were stacked against him to not make it, to do wrong," Butler said of the similarities. "He did what he wanted to do and he turned his life to be successful and he's here now at the top of his game and he really deserves it.

"Every time I always talk to him over the summer like 'Hey, what's up? Where you at?' he always says 'I'm here, training, getting ready,'" Butler says. "And

for me, I really look up to that because I did the exact same thing. It's the offseason but I'm always working because this is what I love to do. This is what he loves to do and it shows. He's not the player he is because he took a couple days off; he's the player he is because he works so incredibly hard."

The similarities were also the source of the bond for Thomas.

"It's basically the same for the both of us," Thomas said. "We easily could have went down the bad road but we somehow overcame that, got around the right people and just been working hard."

So Butler knew he had to reach out to the Broncos receiver. After seeing the story come across his Twitter feed, he messaged Thomas and they began building a bond. They met in person after Butler got him tickets to a game in November when the Nuggets hosted the Bulls and since then they've stayed in touch.

After an eventful summer in which Thomas re-signed a long-term contract with the Broncos and received news that President Barack Obama commuted his mother's prison sentence, it came time for Butler to visit Thomas and watch him play.

Given that the Bulls will be on a west-coast trip during the Broncos' Nov. 22 visit to Chicago to play the Bears, the season opener against the Ravens was the best option for Butler. It also happened to nearly coincide with his birthday (Sept. 14), so Thomas played



host and gifted Butler with a signed jersey, tickets to the game and field passes.

"It's good to have a person that knows your background, his background and you both work hard toward something that you really love," Thomas says.

"It's my first time really being around him a lot, yesterday. It touched me to see how big a fan he is of me, and it's the same with me. Now he's my favorite basketball player."

An avid NBA fan, Thomas had watched as Butler's career blossomed over the past few years, and the respect for each other's craft has only increased since they met.

"Demaryius has shown me so much love," Butler said. "I told him I would come check him out and he took care of everything. So I'm a fan of him, I'm a fan of the Broncos. I won't lie, but I think I'm a much bigger fan of him.

"He's like a brother to me now," he added.

Butler is even trying to arrange another visit to be around when Thomas' mother arrives in Denver for her first time seeing her son play in person.

Finding rare solace in a remarkably similar background, these two stars of their respective sports—each having lost a sense of family in their childhood before eventually regaining it—have added an unlikely yet undeniable brotherhood.