NATCHITOCHES – Northwestern State has hired former Nicholls State head coach Jay Thomas, a finalist for national coach of the year honors in a 2005 playoff season, as its new head football coach, athletic director Greg Burke said Thursday evening.

Thomas, 52, will be introduced Friday at a 3 p.m. press conference in the Stroud Room of the NSU Athletic Fieldhouse. He has been defensive coordinator and assistant head coach for the past year at Division II Missouri Southern in Joplin, following two seasons as the Demons' defensive line coach and assistant head coach in 2010 and 2011.

Thomas spent 14 seasons at Nicholls, the last five (2004-2009) as head coach. Despite hurricanes that interrupted preseason or the regular season in three years, he had an overall 27-35 record that included Nicholls' only Southland Conference championship (2005 co-championship) and wins over four nationally-ranked teams and FBS foe Rice. His Colonels finished the 2005 season ranked 17th in the Sports Network's FCS Top 25, and reached a school-record high ranking of 13th in 2007.

During his tenure as head coach, Thomas instituted academic emphasis which resulted in the Nicholls team's Academic Progress Rate improving from 746 to 930 over his five seasons.

Burke, who made the decision to seek a new head coach on Nov. 19, said first-hand experience working with Thomas at Northwestern and watching his teams at Nicholls proved pivotal.

"This certainly has been a lengthier search process than most, myself included, had anticipated and in the end, there is a high confidence level in handing the reigns of Demon football to somebody in Jay Thomas with whom I have an extremely high comfort level. Through and through, he is a football coach who has deep roots in Louisiana," said Burke. "I really enjoyed building a relationship with Jay when he was an NSU assistant coach and look forward to now working side-by-side with him as our head coach.

"First and foremost, Jay will sustain the very positive pieces that are in place as it relates to student-athlete welfare," said Burke. "He will care about the players but at the same time, will ensure a level of discipline that will have positive ramifications both on and off the field. Our players are going to enjoying playing for him."
The Demons are eager to return as Southland Conference championship contenders and have hired a coach who has a league crown to his credit.

"Jay has demonstrated that as a head coach, he can win a Southland Conference championship and did so under extraordinarily difficult circumstances in the wake of Hurricane Katrina," said Burke. "A Division I head football coach is expected to oversee a very diverse set of responsibilities but ultimately, winning football games is paramount. I liked Jay's plan, based on his 24 years of Division I coaching experience and especially on his familiarity with the inner workings of the football program, to initiate an upward winning trend here."

As the month-long hiring process evolved, Burke said the versatility and accomplishments of Thomas proved compelling, and extended conversations with him confirmed Burke's positive impressions.

"We really vetted Jay's candidacy on a number of levels. He has successfully raised money and did so in a tough economy. He is a Louisiana native who is respected throughout the state and knows where to find good football players here and in the region. During his previous tenure at NSU, he was well-liked and well-respected in the community," said Burke.

"I think our fans are going to like the offensive and defensive philosophies that he intends to implement. Also, he and his family will be great additions to the Natchitoches community. Again, while the process took time, in the end we ended up with a good football coach who matched up well with much of what we were looking for in our next head coach."

Nicholls defeated non-conference foes such as Eastern Washington and Florida A&M while posting a 4-2 record against the Demons amid a 17-21 league record under Thomas. He was the 2005 Southland Conference coach of the year and a finalist for the Sports Network's Eddie Robinson Coach of the Year Award.

Among players he recruited and developed at Nicholls is star cornerback and kick returner LaDarius Webb of the Baltimore Ravens and three other NFL Draft picks, Kareem Moore (Washington, 2007), Jacob Bender (New York Jets, 2005) and Chris Thompson (Jacksonville, 2003).

He was defensive line coach at Southeast Missouri State from 1993-99 and was a graduate assistant coach under the legendary Pete Jenkins at LSU from 1988-90, part of a staff that guided the Tigers to the 1988 Southeastern Conference championship.

Thomas replaces Bradley Dale Peveto, whose contract was not renewed after a 4-7 season that was the Demons' fourth straight losing season. Thomas guided Nicholls to a pair of winning seasons and a .500 record in a third season in a program that had only one season of .500 or better in the previous seven campaigns. His three .500 or better seasons gave Nicholls three of only four at that level in the past 13 years.