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UW Football

The inspiring tale of Cal's best player

 By **Danny O'Neil**
Seattle Times staff reporter

As a high-school freshman, Scott Fujita weighed 120 pounds. He was up to 205 when he entered California, but he didn't shave much or have a scholarship.

"When he got here, he looked like he was 15 or 16," said Todd Rice, Cal's strength coach.

Four years and 50 pounds later, Fujita's frame fills a doorway. He built himself from a walk-on safety to a Pac-10 linebacker. Then he rebuilt himself from neck surgery in March 2000.

He is married, received his undergraduate degree last June and will likely be chosen in the NFL draft in April.

Coach Tom Holmoe called Fujita the best example of the student-athlete experience in his five years at Cal. The coach also called Fujita his team's best player. A cynic would point out that Cal's best player is a walk-on and say it's indicative of the talent level at Berkeley (0-3). A cynic would miss a great story about perseverance and discipline.

"He's a leader, the kind of player that every coach would love to have on his team," Holmoe said before the season started.

Four years ago, Fujita was a player no one wanted when he graduated from Rio Mesa High School in Camarillo, Calif. He wasn't offered a Division I scholarship and it wasn't until a month before graduation that Cal asked him to walk on.

"They gave me a shot, and that was the bottom line," Fujita said. "I didn't think I was really going to get a chance to play at the Pac-10 schools."

He was too slow to be a Pac-10 safety and too small to play linebacker. His father, Rod, called him a late bloomer. Football coaches called him a "tweener."

"I was in-between body sizes and in-between positions," he says.

But Fujita has grown up learning to make seemingly incongruous pieces fit perfectly. Scott and his brother Jason, both of whom are of European ancestry, were adopted by Helen and Rod Fujita. "I'm white in blood, but half Japanese in my heart," Scott said.

His father, Rod, is of Japanese descent, and the family grew up celebrating Japanese traditions. Scott was 6 months old when he was adopted. The family culture was a natural fit from the start. Football took more work.

He received a scholarship after he redshirted during the 1997 season. He didn't have the speed to play safety, but he began bulking up to fit at linebacker. His discipline wasn't reflected in 40-yard-dash times. It showed up in weight-room attendance.

Fujita arrives twice every day, as reliable as a clock, and just as relentless. At noon, Rice knows he will come through with his lunch. At 9, he's there to lift.

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"It's a tremendous story of just incredible ordinariness, I guess," Rice said. "He's not extraordinary, he's incredibly ordinary and he's made himself because of that tremendous amount of discipline."

As a kid, Fujita organized his sports cards year by year and team by team. He collected comic books and his father watched him keep them in protective plastic sleeves. Even the DVD movies Scott and his wife own are catalogued on a computer database so he can look them up by actor.

"There are certain guys in my experience in coaching that you just never worry about," Rice said. "You know they have their life incredibly ordered."

Fujita had a 4.2 grade average in high school, a 3.4 as an undergraduate and he is currently taking graduate courses in education.

But he came close to graduating without finishing football. By spring of 2000, Fujita had difficulty sleeping through the night, let alone working out. He was suffering from "stingers," the euphemism for trauma to a nerve, whether it is stretched, pulled or pinched. A sharp pain or numbness occurs in the neck or shoulders. Fujita would get a stinger if he sat at a computer too long or rolled over wrong while sleeping.

In March 2000, he underwent an operation to remove the bone spurs that had developed in his neck. He was in the hospital for five days, was at home for the next month and lost between 25 and 30 pounds.

"About the third week, it still hurt, but I could tell something was different," Fujita said.

The weight came back gradually. This time, he showed discipline by exercising restraint.

"He didn't come back and start to lift like a madman," Rice said. "He was very smart about not doing anything that would jeopardize what had happened."

Now, as Fujita gets bigger, people start emphasizing how small he was as a freshman. He was 205, but has read that he was 190 pounds. Others have said 180.

"Pretty soon people are going to be saying he weighed 140," Rice joked. "It keeps shrinking."

The exaggeration is unnecessary. Fujita's story is so good it doesn't need padding.

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