



'I feel privileged to have dual heritage,' said Scott Fujita of the New Orleans Saints.

## The Saint With Green Eyes, Community Ties

**Scott Fujita muscled his way into the NFL with equal parts brains and brawn. Now the five-year veteran wants to rekindle the spirits of the Gulf Coast one year after the hurricanes.**

**By Lynda Lin, Assistant Editor  
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The name on the football jersey reads "Fujita," but by his own admission, he does not have one drop of Japanese blood. Instead New Orleans Saints linebacker number 55 has what he calls dual heritage — a chiseled jaw line and green Irish eyes. Yes, Scott Fujita is Japanese American.

He's been telling every one this simple fact for as long as he could remember. It's just that people don't tend to believe him.

"I'd get a lot of questions from substitute teachers. They would ask me to provide ID," said Scott, 27, about his formative years growing up in Camarillo, Calif. Of course in Ventura County, with its large Hispanic population he was also frequently called "Fajita," he added.

It comes with the territory of being a 6-foot-5 inch, 250-pound National Football League player who is defined as being "not Japanese" as often as he is lauded for being consistent. Scott, who was adopted as a baby by Ventura County JACLers Rod and Helen Fujita, has learned to handle the quizzical looks and the double takes with humor and an unwaivering determination towards achieving every set goal.

Challenge is a motif in Scott's life. It follows him and he inevitably conquers it. Now he's about to embark on a new season and his fifth year in the NFL playing for an underdog team in a city that was decimated by hurricanes one year ago.

He's again ready for the challenge — it's in his blood.

## Nurturing an Real Identity

"I'm not delusional. I'm not a person trying to be someone I'm not. I don't have single drop of Japanese blood in me," said Scott to the *Pacific Citizen* from Jackson, Mississippi.

His identity and sense of self was hewed out of his relationship with his family, whose lineage is also deeply rooted in strength. Scott's grandfather, Nagao Fujita, was a member of the World War II 442nd Regimental Combat Team who fought for a country that forced his family into an internment camp. In the desert sands of Gila River, Rod was born.

Nagao, who was the first English-speaking JA attorney at the time, regaled young Scott and older brother Jason (who is also adopted) with heroic war stories.

"There's something about the Japanese culture where the first grandson is spoiled rotten, so my brother Jason got everything — he got war swords, you name it," said Scott.

From his grandmother he heard about the desolation of his father's birthplace.

"I grew up with a lot of interest in the subject [of the internment]," he added.

Growing up, Scott frequented *Obon* festivals and introduced Caucasian friends to Japanese comfort food. Recently he found a sushi restaurant near his home in New Orleans for a taste of home cooking.

"We don't know how old he was when he realized he wasn't Japanese!" said Rod.

And while many young Asian Pacific Americans still struggle with their own identities, Scott wears his on his sleeve.

"I feel privileged to have dual heritage."

Scott plans to impart the same cultural lessons on his future kids.

"My wife [Jaclyn] is blonde too," said Scott, who jokes that they'll have some more explaining to do when they have little Fujitas.

## Fifth Round Pick

At five, Scott decided he wanted to be like Michael Jordan, so he asked his dad to teach him how to dribble. With permission Scott spent hours just practicing to dribble on their neighbor's driveway. Then in high school Scott decided he wanted to learn how to throw a football.

"I knew he had talent. I never realized where he could go with it," said Rod, 63, a retired high school teacher.

Rod enrolled Scott in Pop Warner Football as a running back.

Desi Sandlin, a former coach of the Road Runner's Pop Warner team, remembers a scrappy seven-year-old Scott

running on the field for the first time.

“He was all skin and bones!” said Sandlin with a laugh. “He was so determined. Everything he did was 100 percent. You know when kids hit for the first time they’re kind of shy? When Scott hit we knew it was something special.”

Seeing his talent, Sandlin snuck Scott into the linebacker position. Now Sandlin jokes, “See. I knew where he had to be.”

In high school, Scott decided he wanted to play Division-1 football. His options weren't limited — he graduated with a 4.3 grade point average from Rio Mesa High School. He was a walk-on for the University of California, Berkeley's football team, but finished off with a scholarship and a degree in political science. He also earned a master's degree in education in one year.

Despite his charmed life, his father says things usually don't come easy for Scott — his son just works hard.

The NFL came calling and Scott was drafted out of college in the fifth round to the Kansas City Chiefs. In his first year, he was honored with the club's Mack Lee Hill Award, an honor presented annually to the team's top rookie. In his second season as a full-time starter, Scott led the defense with 112 tackles.

Then he injured his ankle and rumors swirled about whether he would get back in the game. When he was ready, the team had spent the money elsewhere and Scott asked to be traded.

A week before the 2005 season started, the JA headed to Texas to become a Cowboy.

## Playing for Parcels

The Dallas Cowboys can be remembered for their coach's 2004 gaffe. While talking to reporters about his quarterback coach Sean Payton, Coach Bill Parcels said the team had a few “Jap plays,” and added, “Surprise things.”

“I don't take things like that lightly,” said Fujita about racial slurs. He had not heard about Parcell's ethnic slur. “Like I said, I feel privileged to have dual heritage, and I didn't face much personal ridicule, but you hear comments here and there. People grow up in different places ... I have called people out before and they've apologized.”

If he knew about the comments, Scott said he would've confronted Parcels about that and he's confident that the coach would've apologized.

Payton is now head coach of the Saints, where Scott in March signed a four-year, \$12 million contract

He arrived in New Orleans after the storms.

“When you see it in person, it's a lot worst.” He was in town looking for place to live and they drove through the 9th Ward. “It just blew me away.”

One year after the hurricanes tore the Gulf Coast apart, Scott along with teammate Reggie Bush expect to restore some hope in the region.

Help change one person at a time, said Scott.

### On the Web:

[www.scottfujita.com](http://www.scottfujita.com)

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