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Cowboys' castoffs lead way
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The Cowboys didn't need them, and they didn't want them. At least that's the way linebackers Scott Fujita and Scott Shanle felt. So, while the Cowboys were busy moving defensive end Greg Ellis to linebacker, signing Akin Ayodele in free agency and drafting Bobby Carpenter, Fujita signed with the New Orleans Saints as a free agent, and Shanle later followed there in a trade.

Fujita and Shanle left a Super Bowl favorite for one picked last in the NFC South before the season. Today, they are thanking their lucky fleurs de lis as the Saints play the Chicago Bears for the NFC title Sunday.

"I had been offered [a contract] in the few months prior to free agency, and as free agency hit, the offer declined," Fujita said in a conference call Wednesday. "For me, it was all about finding the right fit and the place where I felt the most comfortable and thought I would be the happiest.

"Once free agency opened up, and I came down to New Orleans, I just felt like I was right here where I belonged. It was nothing against Dallas. I enjoyed my time there, and I felt like they had a good thing going. It was just time for me to have a change."

Reunited with head coach Sean Payton, who had been the Cowboys' offensive coordinator, and defensive coordinator Gary Gibbs, who had been the Cowboys' linebackers coach, Fujita and Shanle felt right at home.

They were joined by three other former Cowboys teammates: receiver Terrance Copper, kicker Billy Cundiff and offensive lineman Rob Petitti. (Saints safety Omar Stoutmire played for the Cowboys from 1997-98.)

"I think Sean kind of tried to follow Bill [Parcells] in having players he was familiar with on his team," Shanle said in a telephone interview Thursday. "If there were players he was around before and he liked them and he knew them and he knew what type of character they had, obviously it makes sense to try to bring guys like that in to build your team with."

Fujita and Shanle were just what the coach ordered.

Linebacker had been a problem for the Saints, which is why Fujita was Payton's first free-agent signing. Fujita, who started the Cowboys' final eight games in 2005, agreed to a four-year, \$12 million deal. Payton acquired his other two starting linebackers, Shanle and Mark Simoneau, in preseason trades after Anthony Simmons retired.

Shanle, who started eight games in 2005 after Dat Nguyen was injured, cost the Saints a 2007 seventh-round draft choice.

"I felt like I had done enough good things and had shown that I had the ability to play," Shanle said. "I kind of took offense to seeing [the Cowboys] going out in free agency and also drafting other linebackers. It was a frustrating time, but it all worked out for the best."

Shanle finished as the Saints' leading tackler with 97, one more than Fujita. Simoneau was fifth with 61. Shanle and Fujita combined for 7.5 sacks and two interceptions.

"It was kind of an interesting off-season at that position because, from the point that I got here, there was a lot of criticism," Fujita said. "... But it's a credit to our scouting staff and the coaches for finding the right guys to come in and to fit into what they want to do.

"I mean, to pull in a guy like Scott Shanle from Dallas with two preseason games left, and then to go find Mark Simoneau from Philly right before the last preseason game, and then for everything to come together for that first game and have everything go so smoothly, that's a credit to everybody involved."

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In the know

Cowboys east

Sean Payton has five Saints who were with him in Dallas:

Player

Pos.

How acquired

Terrance Copper

WR

Waivers

He caught 23 passes, averaging 16.7 yards per catch in the regular season.

Billy Cundiff

K

Free agent

He had three touchbacks in his five weeks as the team's kickoff specialist in the regular season.

Scott Fujita

LB

Free agent

He started 16 games and had 96 tackles, 3.5 sacks and two interceptions.

Rob Petitti

OL

Waivers

He played in one game during the regular season.

Scott Shanle

LB

Trade

He started 15 games and had a team-leading 97 tackles and four sacks.

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