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Dream one step to reality for locals

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Sleep has been hard to come by for **Scott Fujita** the last few days. He tosses and turns under the covers and stares at the ceiling wide awake at 4 a.m.

In his mind, the New Orleans Saints linebacker is picturing every detail of the game, from the opening kickoff to the cathartic celebration in the city streets.

"I have been thinking about this moment my whole life," said **Fujita**, a Rio Mesa High graduate. "I know it sounds cheesy, but it's really the truth. I feel like I am knocking on heaven's door right now being one win away from the Super Bowl."

Two other area athletes - Saints tight end Billy Miller and Indianapolis Colts linebacker Freddy Keiaho - have endured similar restless nights while anticipating the fulfillment of a childhood dream.

Today, the trio will try to create an all-county Super Bowl showdown when the Saints travel to Soldier Field to play the Chicago Bears in the NFC Championship Game and the Colts host the New England Patriots in the AFC Championship Game.

The Saints are making the first conference championship appearance in franchise history, and are the first team in NFL history to reach that stage after losing 13 or more games the previous season.

After Hurricane Katrina ravaged their city last year, the nomadic Saints were forced to play every game outside of New Orleans and finished 3-13.

As the city continues to recover from the devastation - debris remains piled on street corners and FEMA trailers are still parked on front

lawns - this year's team has become a beacon of hope for many residents and a welcome diversion for others.

"This is the first time you really realize you are playing for something bigger than just football," said Miller, a Westlake High graduate. "This city has really gotten behind this team and it has truly been something special. A lot of fans enjoy football, but these fans really needed this type of season."

Miller, 29, is coming off a breakout performance in the Saints' victory over the Philadelphia Eagles last week. The former USC standout wide receiver caught four passes for a team-high 64 yards.

"That was my first opportunity to not only play in an NFL playoff game, but to get my number called and show my teammates and coaches what I am capable of," Miller said. "It was one of the best feelings I have ever had, and it's the same thing going into this week. I am so excited to wake up in the morning and get out to the practice field."

Just a few months ago, Miller was preparing himself for life after the NFL. The Cleveland Browns waived him in 2005 and no other teams expressed interest. But right before training camp began last summer, the Saints called.

"I almost had to think about it because I wanted it to be a genuine opportunity, and not just where they need some guy in camp to save the legs of the guys they plan on keeping," Miller said. "But coach (Sean) Payton told me I had a shot at not only making the team but actually contributing."

It seemed like a false promise once the Saints released Miller before the season started. But they brought him back in late October after an injury to Ernie Conwell.

"It was frustrating to be let go because I felt I had probably one of the best camps of my whole career," said Miller, in his seventh professional season. "All sorts of things go through your mind when they say, 'Don't worry, we are bringing you back.' Well, I have been cut five times and have heard that a lot. No one has ever done it until I got here."

Miller and **Fujita**, 27, were familiar with each other's exploits during high school, but never met until arriving in New Orleans. Now, the two sit together in team meetings and share stories from the past after practice. They discovered **Fujita's** father taught Miller's younger brother in high school.

"To come here and have a guy from the area has been great," said Miller, who recently purchased a home in Moorpark. "We fit right in together, and it's been fun to experience this with him."

Fujita set off a frenzy earlier this season by spontaneously offering 25 free tickets to fans for the Saints final regular-season game against the New York Giants. Inspired by the support the team received on the road in Dallas, **Fujita** made the announcement during a live television interview in the locker room after the Saints beat the Cowboys.

"Within minutes there were a couple hundred people lining up outside the Saints facility in the middle of the night," **Fujita** said. "They bombarded the ticket office and held a rally. It was pretty wild. We ended up getting a thousand requests."

Fujita asked five other teammates to donate more tickets to bump the total to 50. The fans paid their own way to New York to watch the Christmas Eve showdown and the local paper even sent a reporter to chronicle the story.

"I have played in some pretty good football towns, but never in a place where I feel like the fans and the team are truly in it together," said **Fujita**, who signed as a free agent with the Saints in the offseason after stints in Kansas City and Dallas. "It's not just lip service here, it's the real thing, and that is what has made this season so rare and unique."

But the Saints also want it known they are more than just a feel-good story, and their success on the field hasn't been gained by pure emotion alone.

"We don't want it to get lost through all of this that we are a pretty damn good football team," **Fujita** said. "Hopefully we can continue to show that this weekend and keep this ride going a little longer."

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