

## Dallas exit became Super decision

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MIAMI -- Linebacker Scott Fujita left the Dallas Cowboys after one season to join Sean Payton in New Orleans. At the time, it seemed like career suicide -- at least to outsiders.

The Cowboys had five Super Bowl rings displayed in the lobby of their Valley Ranch facility. They were coming off a 9-7 season, and with Bill Parcells on the Cowboys' sideline, the 2006 season held the promise of yet another title.

The Saints, on the other hand, appeared to be a lost cause. They had only one playoff victory in their history, and they were coming off a 3-13 season. Worse, the team was returning to a city devastated by Hurricane Katrina in August 2005.

"Most people thought we were crazy," Fujita said of he and his wife, Jaclyn. "Friends, family, really everybody we talked to. Especially since we were in Dallas, everybody was like, 'Why would you want to leave Dallas? That's America's Team.'

"I never felt that strong of a connection to Dallas. It was a good organization. But it's not like I felt any deep connection or need to stay. But I felt like there might be something here for us.... As soon as Jaclyn and I got here, within a few hours we felt like we had to be here. I always talk about being part of the rebuilding process, and I mean that literally and figuratively. Really in every sense of the word we wanted to be here to help rebuild. And I feel like that's what we've helped do. For me now to be sitting at this point as a culmination of all that, it's just perfect."

The Saints began their rebuilding with castoffs from the Cowboys, and in Super Bowl XLIV, three ex-Cowboys will start on their defense.

The Saints' first move in 2006 was to hire Cowboys offensive coordinator Sean Payton, a Parcells disciple, as the franchise's 14th head coach. The three seasons Payton spent under Parcells and in Dallas rubbed off on Payton and the Saints.

"We had just finished building a house in Texas, and logistically, there were a bunch of things that didn't make it the right time," Payton said. "But there was enough in the two visits that I felt we had a chance to make a difference. There is a lot of work that goes into it, like surrounding yourself with the right people, and we've been able to do that."

Payton took Cowboys linebackers coach Gary Gibbs with him, hiring Gibbs as his first defensive coordinator. (Gibbs was fired after the 2008 season.)

Payton claimed receiver Terrance Copper off waivers from the Cowboys, and Copper was one of the Saints' top "gunners" on kick coverage for three seasons. Copper made 15 special teams tackles in 35 games, and he caught 38 passes for 511 yards and five touchdowns in his career with the Saints. (He spent last season with the Kansas City Chiefs.)

Payton's first defensive addition was Fujita, who signed as a free agent. Fujita has 417 tackles, 7.5 sacks, four interceptions and six forced fumbles in 56 starts over the past four seasons.

Just before the start of the 2006 season, Payton traded a seventh-round draft choice to Dallas for linebacker Scott Shanle, who had made only 11 starts in three seasons with the Cowboys. Shanle has 464 tackles, four sacks, two interceptions, 10 pass breakups and four forced fumbles in 60 starts the past four years. (The Cowboys used the 2007 draft choice acquired for Shanle on safety Alan Ball.)

Copper, Fujita and Shanle were three of the 28 newcomers Payton brought to the Saints before his first season as head coach.

"It wasn't, 'Well, we just need to bring a few of our guys,' more than it was, 'Hey, Terrance Copper is going to be a gunner; he's going to play on kickoff, punt returns; he's going to hit the core of our special teams; he'll be our fourth receiver. I know exactly what I'm getting, and that's valuable information,'" Payton said. "Fujita, similar vision in terms of what you want, and Scott Shanle. So when the player-fit matches, and you have maybe a little bit more background because you've coached him, then there's less risk.

"It sometimes can be a risky proposition when you go sign free agents. We've been able to benefit -- both the player and the club -- from that relationship."

Payton added another ex-Cowboy before the 2008 season. He signed defensive tackle Remi Ayodele, whom the Cowboys had cut after the 2007 season. Ayodele was one of eight players the Saints added in free agency that year, and they acquired two more players in

trades.

Ayodele started 13 games this season, making 53 tackles with 1.5 sacks. He produced in big games, too. He recovered a fumble for a touchdown against the New York Jets, and against the Minnesota Vikings in the NFC Championship Game, he recovered a fumble and forced a Brett Favre interception.

"I hadn't even thought of all the Cowboys' connections," said Ayodele, who played high school ball at South Grand Prairie. "We're just building a little something, taking a little piece of something here and a little piece of something there, and eventually it will come together, and it has."

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