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No backing down: New Browns linebacker Scott Fujita is more than willing to stand up for what he believes in

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The NFL locker room has never been a place to go for enlightenment. It may rank above a backwoods garage plastered with posters of supermodels. But it's nowhere close to the Dalai Lama's sanctuary.

The NFL locker room isn't all that different from the one shared by teenage boys after high school gym class. More 3-karat diamond earrings, Tag Heuer watches and Gucci shoes, but not that much different. Flatulence jokes and homosexual slurs still bring laughter.

The NFL locker room is where Browns linebacker Scott Fujita spends much of his time. It's where he stands out like the opinionated, liberal California Berkeley graduate that he is.

His willingness to speak out for a cause - even one that may not be popular in the locker room - was never more obvious than last year when he agreed to endorse the National Equality March for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender rights.

"A friend asked if I'd lend my name to the cause and I said absolutely, without hesitation," Fujita told The Chronicle-Telegram earlier this month after a minicamp practice. "Being a football player, it was kinda groundbreaking news. I really didn't think it was that big of a deal, just me offering up an opinion."

Ravens linebacker Brendon Ayanbadejo put the issue somewhat in the spotlight with an essay on Huffington Post supporting same-sex marriage. Fujita was glad to keep the ball rolling.

Even if it meant alienating some fans and taking the grief that follows in the locker room.

"That's a risk I'm willing to take," he told The Advocate, a gay and lesbian news magazine, before last year's Super Bowl with the Saints. "Because for every piece of hate mail I've received for speaking out in support of gay marriage or for wanting to bring the troops home or for discussing the injustices of Japanese internment, there's a dozen people who either appreciate what I'm doing or who think about the issue in a different way."

Fujita was signed as a free agent in the offseason to add size (6-foot-5, 250 pounds) and versatility to the Browns linebacking corps. He also brought a world view that doesn't fit the template of dumb jock.

He was born in 1979 to a teenage mother and adopted by the Fujitas when he was 6 months old. Rodney was a third-generation Japanese-American man and Helen a white woman. Rodney was born in a Japanese-American relocation camp in Arizona while his father fought for America in Italy in World War II.

Scott, who is white, ate rice with chopsticks and embraced Japanese culture.

"I have no Japanese blood in my body," he told the Boston Globe. "I have a Japanese heart."

Fujita is married to Jaclyn and has twin daughters, Isabell and Delilah. His gay-rights beliefs were influenced by his upbringing.

"I think because I have a unique family history," he said. "I kinda had that knowledge growing up about a family, a race that was discriminated against in a way that a lot of people in this country don't realize because it was so long ago."

"So I always want to stand up for equal rights for everybody, regardless of what the issue is. And that was an important one."

Fujita is especially bothered by the notion that gay couples aren't qualified, or shouldn't be allowed, to adopt.

"There are a lot of children, especially in the South, who need good homes to step into, and a lot of gay couples have been prevented the right to adopt," he said. "What that tells me then is they'd rather have kids bouncing around, kind of institutionalized from foster home to foster home."

"To me, as an adopted child, that makes no sense. The most important thing for any kid is to have a home that's willing to care for them and love them."

Fujita calls gay rights "a human issue" and can't believe equality remains elusive.

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"Really, there should be no debate anymore," he told the Nation Magazine.

Fujita admits his political slant was affected by his time at the left-leaning Berkeley. He also believes the NFL locker room isn't the black hole of ignorance it once was.

"I think that's kind of a myth," he said. "I think there was a time where football was really 1950s, and for the most part, certain aspects of it are.

"But if you have something you're passionate about, as long as you're not being a distraction, then it's fine. Players in the locker room are a lot more tolerant and accepting than they get credit for. Whether everyone's OK with marriage equality and those kind of issues, I don't know. But it's not like it's an issue in the locker room, not by any means."

Fellow linebacker David Bowens, 32, was the unofficial team spokesman last year. He thinks before he answers a question and is eloquent in his responses.

He's seen the locker room change in his decade in the NFL, but realizes it's still evolving.

"It's more diverse as far as people's thinking, people talking about different backgrounds, believing a lot of different things. It's still macho, though," Bowens said. "It's not something where (homosexuality is) openly talked about, comfortably talked about. Just for the simple fact that no matter what you believe in, there's a little gray area when you come in here in this environment."

Fujita and Bowens said the open discourse doesn't lead to arguments among teammates or negatively affect the camaraderie. But the typical "locker room talk" remains pervasive, and Fujita hears the gay slurs that are common putdowns, just as they were in junior high.

"That's one of those things I don't think is going to change for a long time," he said. "If it's something I think is disrespectful, then I'll point it out and say, 'Hey, man, why don't you tone that down a little bit.' There's still some time before all that stuff is eliminated."

"It hasn't gone away," Bowens said. "But having said that, that's not like guys are opposed to the different views and the gay adoptions, gay marriages, things like that. I know I am for whatever makes people happy."

Fujita would be happy to hear that.

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