

## Patron Saint

By Rhiannon Potkey

Saturday, February 6, 2010

Delilah and Isabelle Fujita can hardly contain their excitement every time their family drives by the Louisiana Superdome.

The 2-year-old twin girls squeal with delight when they see the three-story poster of their daddy hanging outside the facility.

Whether as a playmaker on the field, an outspoken leader in the locker room or an activist in the community, Scott Fujita portrays a larger-than-life presence in New Orleans.

The Rio Mesa High graduate has made an improbable rise from a walk-on safety at UC Berkeley to a starting linebacker for a Super Bowl-bound NFL team.

Fujita will be proudly donning his No. 55 jersey as the New Orleans Saints make their Super Bowl debut today against the Indianapolis Colts at Sun Life Stadium in Miami.

"This is certainly something you always dream about," the 6-foot-5, 250-pound Fujita said. "I think the longer you play in the league, the more desperate you become to make it here. The sense of urgency elevates year in and year out, and I am just so happy for this team and this city. ... They deserve this."

Fujita, 30, is in his eighth season in the NFL. He was drafted by the Kansas City Chiefs in the fifth round in 2002 and played one season for the Dallas Cowboys before signing with the Saints in 2006.

In an age when many professional athletes avoid discussing controversial issues for fear it could hurt their endorsement potential, Fujita rarely hesitates to share his opinion.

An NFL Players Association co-alternate player representative, Fujita has spoken out in support of gay rights and President Barack Obama.

"The more I have aged the more I recognize the platform we are given and I recognize it is not going to last forever," said Fujita, who graduated from Cal with a degree in political science and masters in education. "Three years from now, no one will care what I have to say. If I can have any kind of positive influence on anybody or anything, this is the time to do it."

Fujita's endorsement of the National Equality March last October was featured in an

interview on the Huffington Post.

“You wouldn’t believe some of the hate mail I received from some of those things. It’s shocking,” Fujita said. “But what is comforting was the amount of positive responses I received as well. I believe in what I say and I don’t expect everyone to agree with it.”

George Contreras, Fujita’s football coach at Rio Mesa, is not surprised by Fujita’s advocacy.

“He was always the kind of guy who looked out for the little guy on campus, maybe because he was the little guy at one time,” Contreras said. “He wasn’t ever a big dog about things. He was a down-to-earth kid who enjoyed things and had fun.”

Fujita entered Rio Mesa as a 5-foot-6, 120-pound freshman, hardly a physical specimen portending to NFL success.

“At that point I was just hoping he could make varsity,” Contreras said. “He came in small, but he had a great attitude and was a really, really hard worker. Obviously those things paid off in the long run and, of course, he also had the skills to back that stuff up.”

Fujita was the first free agent to join the Saints in 2006 once head coach Sean Payton was hired.

Arriving only one year after Hurricane Katrina ravaged the city, Fujita feels a strong connection to New Orleans.

Fujita and his wife, Jaclyn, have lived downtown throughout his Saints career and their daughters were born in the city.

“One of the reasons Jaclyn and I came here is we wanted to be part of the rebuilding process, literally and figuratively,” Fujita said. “We wanted to be here through the whole thing whether we reached the Super Bowl or not one day. For us to see all the changes in the last four years and develop a relationship with this city and with all the people has really been a huge part of the journey for us.”

Fujita was recently named the 2009 New Orleans Saints “Man of the Year” for his work on and off the field.

He is heavily involved in two public campaigns that have deep personal meaning to him — breast cancer awareness and adoption.

Fujita was adopted as an infant by Rod and Helen Fujita, and Helen survived breast cancer twice.

Rod Fujita is a third-generation Japanese-American who was born inside an Arizona internment camp while his father was fighting in World War II as a member of the United States military.

As he grew older, Scott Fujita learned more about the experience from his

grandmother, Lillie.

“I didn’t hear any sense of resentment at all in her voice,” Fujita said. “I never have. She grew stronger from it, and I just always say, ‘What do I have to complain about?’”

As successful as this season has been for the Saints, it’s not been without its share of adversity for Fujita.

He missed five games with injuries after tearing a calf muscle and rupturing a bursa sac in his knee. The ruptured bursa sac led to a staph infection that required emergency surgery.

“That part was frustrating, but realistically it has been one of my most productive years,” said Fujita, who has 58 tackles, two forced fumbles and one sack. “I am really proud of what we all did. It’s been kind of a dream season.”

Fujita is in the final year of his contract with the Saints and uncertain about his future. The NFL’s collective bargaining agreement is set to expire.

“There are a lot of unknowns right now with free agents at the end of the season. It’s kind of scary,” Fujita said. “But I want to stay here in New Orleans and hopefully the team feels the same way. This is where my career was reborn and I love playing here.”

