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An Interview with:

NEW ORLEANS SAINTS LB SCOTT FUJITA

THE MODERATOR: Ladies and gentlemen, we have got Scott Fujita on the line. Let's open it up for questions.

Q. When you played for Bill Parcells he always liked having players around him that who knew him as a coach and kind of what he wanted and could be the leaders. Has it been sort of that same way with Sean Payton? Have you and Scott Shanle kind of led the way in knowing what he wants, especially in the beginning when he first got there?

SCOTT FUJITA: I think he created an atmosphere early on where he just wanted to find players who would come in and accept their role, whatever that may be. And that's what most of the guys have done, stepped up and accepted their roles. He looked for leaders. He looked for guys with a lot of heart and character. And for the most part, I think he found the right 53.

Q. Did you guys ever dream before the season when you left Dallas that you guys could be in this situation, in the NFC Championship game?

SCOTT FUJITA: I've been dreaming about this moment since I was eight years old, so it has been a long time coming.

Q. How do you think that people in New Orleans will react if you win on Sunday and go on to the Super Bowl?

SCOTT FUJITA: They'll react the way they always do and then some. The last playoff victory over Philadelphia, it's just been a great city to be a part of. That atmosphere is contagious and the players feed off of it. The coaches are encouraged by it.

I say this all along, and I have throughout the course of the season, I have never been on a

team where I really felt like the community and the team were in it together. And that's not just lip service, that's the truth.

Q. Why do you think that's the case?

SCOTT FUJITA: You know, there's so much stuff for them to latch on to. Like I said, I think it's kind of a reciprocative relationship. When I first moved here with my wife, we bought a place down right down in the Warehouse District downtown. Walking around the city for the first couple months or so, people were so excited the Saints were back in town and they had a chance to come watch our games.

Then once they started to buy into what Sean Payton was doing, and started to believe in what the team was doing and we won a couple of games, then it was, "thank you, guys, for winning." And I've never been in a place where it was so authentic and heartfelt.

Everywhere you go people come up and say, "thank you for being here. Thank you for winning." And I'm like, "no, thank you for your support." And again that's the truth. They just support us so well each and every week. They are with us to the very end, and I'm proud to be a part of it.

Q. Do you feel like you're giving hope to people in New Orleans?

SCOTT FUJITA: If we are -- it's funny, because at the same time -- maybe we are. At the same time, I feel they're giving a lot of us hope. Seeing the things people have been through and what they have given up just to be able to go to our game, you hear stories about people who are still trying to get their homes rebuilt or they're still staying in hotels and they're behind on payments and everything because (inaudible). Things like that inspire me.

Like I say, it's a reciprocal relationship that this team kind of shares with them. It's rare, it's unique, and it's something I've never been a part of.

Q. Scott, you have a penchant for big plays and big games, and you have the plays on 2nd down and 3rd down that really forced

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them to punt the other day. Can you talk about those two plays? And then I think back to the Kansas City game last year where you had a penchant for making big plays.

SCOTT FUJITA: One of the things we talked about as a defense, especially throughout the course of the season, just being able to make the play when you're nervous. It was just one of those times where the play came my way and it was our responsibility, and it worked out that way. It was at the end of the game at a crucial situation, and obviously my name was attached to it. But people don't pay as much attention to the play that was 2nd and 1 down there in the red zone. Will Smith made a huge play to make it 3rd and 1. It's just little things like that. When guys on defense need to make a play, they make them.

Q. What it's like being reunited with Joe Vitt, who you had in Kansas City?

SCOTT FUJITA: Words can't describe it. I don't know how well you know him. This is a guy that drafted me in Kansas City, gave me my first opportunity and gave me my first start against San Diego five years ago. So he's really a second father figure for me. We've been really tight over the years. We've stayed in touch as we've gone our separate ways. And we've both always felt that at some point we're going to be back together again. When I found out the Saints had hired Joe, I was really excited about it.

Q. When he was interim head coach here, he did a lot of -- in St. Louis last year, he did a lot of motivational talks to players on Saturdays, showed them film clips to get them fired up. Is he doing the same thing in New Orleans?

SCOTT FUJITA: Absolutely. His enthusiasm is infectious. He is probably the best public speaker and motivator I've ever been around. He's been in the league now 28 years. He's a two-time cancer survivor. He has got so many life experiences that apply to so many things we do on the field, where he just finds a way to relate to everybody. He's definitely a great motivator, and I think all the guys, in all positions, enjoy coming by our meeting rooms every once in a while just to hear what he has to talk about.

Q. Before the season, a lot of people said this linebacking group was weak. Talk about how you guys have played this season and kind of dispelled what people thought before the season began?

SCOTT FUJITA: I think it comes down to guys playing their role. It was kind of an interesting off-season, especially at that position, because from the point that I got here there was a lot of criticism that I was hearing, and especially during the preseason, through training camp and the preseason games. There was still a lot of moving parts. And obviously that's not an ideal situation where you're trying to build the right 53 guys for your roster. But credit to our scout staff and the coaches and everything 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, then to go find Mark Simoneau from up in Philly right before the last preseason game. And then to have everything come together for that first game in Cleveland and have everything go so smoothly, that's a credit to everybody involved.

Q. Have you thought about the national perception that the Saints would come back to earth? I know you were riding emotion for a long time, but you never did. I wonder what the feeling of the team was in that regard.

SCOTT FUJITA: Yeah, I think the emotional part of it. We have been riding an emotional wave this whole year. But you can't discredit this is a damn good team that I'm playing on too. From the very beginning, like I said, the emotions, guys were excited about that, and the community and the rest of the country kind of looked at it that way. But the more games you watched and the effort you see the players are putting out there and also the talent level, you see it's a lot more than just an emotional story. This is a legitimate contender.

Q. Do you think people realize that this really isn't the same roster as last year either? It's not the same coaches or the same players, generally.

SCOTT FUJITA: There has been a lot of turnover and a lot of change, but at the same time I don't want to forget about the players that were here in the past, because there are so many guys that are so important to this team that were here in the past.

When I got here in free agency and a lot of the new coaches got here, I looked at it as kind of a fresh start for me in my career and a fresh start for the coaches, but it was also a fresh start for the guys that were here in past and wanted something new to come around, and something new to get emotional about and get excited about. So I don't

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want to forget about those guys at all, and I don't think everyone else should.

Q. Is there one or two things about Sean Payton that has kind of characterized how he's coached this team?

SCOTT FUJITA: He's so detail oriented, as I'm sure a lot of coaches around the league are, but this guy is almost obsessive about it. He gets the situation ready better than any coach I've ever seen. That's why I feel like defensively, two-minute situations, red-zone situations, 3rd down situations, I feel like we're always ready for those situations because he runs us through it so much and has since day one of the off-season and did all through training camp.

Q. It ends up the Cowboys had a lot of problems at linebacker this year. If you had been offered a contract by them, would you have come back to Dallas?

SCOTT FUJITA: I had been offered (a contract) in the few months prior to free agency, and as free agency hit, the offer still declined. 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, I felt like they had a good thing going. It was just time for me to have a change.

Q. All the teams that are left in the playoffs have two-headed monsters at running back. As a defensive player, does that create problems for you or make game day a little different, or how so?

SCOTT FUJITA: Yes, it's not easy. Both these backs are good solid backs. They run real powerful. And for me, not playing the whole NFC division that Chicago plays through the course of the season, with the exception of Green Bay earlier in the year, we didn't get to see a lot of their offense. So for me, watching that game against Seattle the other day was really the first time I got to see their offense. Both the backs, to me, are really powerful, really strong, and really athletic. Like you said, it is kind of a two-headed monster. I've seen our offense, the problems that they pose for the defense, and it's a lot to prepare for.

Q. How do you see your matchup with Rex Grossman who has been struggling lately?

SCOTT FUJITA: People keep saying he's been struggling lately, but when I look at him and

look at the film from the last couple of days, I see a guy who stepped up and played well when he had to. Early in the season he was on fire. And they clinched their division so early in the season and just got way out ahead of everybody. And at that point, maybe his play slipped a little bit, but everything was in the bank for him. Things were going the right way and they still finished 13-3. And you can't do that with poor quarterback play. Again, you look at the first playoff game, he was pretty sharp all the way through and that was with quite a bit of pressure in his face. People talk about his struggles and everything, but I look at him as a great quarterback and it's going to be a big challenge for us because he has got every throw in his arm and he's got a lot of poise. He's got a little bit of gunslinger in him too, which can make you a little bit nervous that he can make those plays.

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