

## Scott Fujita Leads Defense for Bears

Former walk-on becomes star linebacker at Cal.

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**TURLOCK** - Stop me if you've heard this one.

Our hero is undersized, undervalued and outmatched. He finds somebody to take a chance on him and makes good. He works hard and eventually moves his way up from the bottom. He earns the respect of those around him, and soon our hero outlasts everyone and makes it to the top.

Our hero becomes everyone's hero.

Sounds like a Disney movie, right? "I'm a big Disney guy," says the 255-pound linebacker.

Scott Fujita, California native, likes movies. His favorite alternates between Braveheart and Gladiator, with The Lion King receiving the honorable mention. "I'm kind of a movie freak, actually." Fujita estimates that he owns about 415 movies, both VHS and DVD.

Oh, and by the way: he's one highlight reel away from having Paul Tagliabue call out his name on a certain Saturday next April.

But that's now. Lets start at the beginning.

No. 49 entered high school at 5-7, 120 lbs. "I was kind of a late bloomer in high school and went straight up like a bean pole," Fujita says. Flash forward three years. At 6-4 and a shade over 200 pounds as a senior at Rio Mesa High School in Camarillo, he notched 118 tackles, four sacks and five interceptions. He also played basketball, winning the halftime slam-dunk contest in the Ventura County all-star game in his senior season.

In a day and age when Randy Moss plays point guard and Deion Sanders plays minor league baseball, why was this two-sport star overlooked when it came time to hand out the rides? Fujita has an idea. "When I was coming out of high school, one of the main reasons a lot of people turned away from me was that I was what they called a tweener, in between body sizes, and positions too," Fujita says.

Now, it's not like our hero was without options. He could have taken one of several academic scholarships, some offered from Ivy League schools. His football options were limited, and he actually came close to signing on with a Division III university.

But that is when California called. Cal offered the total package for Fujita: academic reputation and Division I football. "To get the call from Cal to just walk on was exactly what I was looking for, and that's why, in a second, I decided to come up here," Fujita recalls.

While redshirting in 1997, he added 20 pounds to his frame and switched to linebacker. Having impressed his coaches and teammates, Fujita was offered a scholarship in the offseason. The next year, he saw his first start against UCLA, recording four tackles in that game and 11 for the year. By the time the season was over, Fujita looked less like the tweener of old, and more like a linebacker, standing 6-5 and carrying 230 pounds.

And he lived happily ever after?

Not so fast. This story has a twist.

The more Fujita played, the more he began to be bothered by what are called "stingers," which result in numbness in the arm and shoulder. This particular animal is usually limited to contact sports and is not commonly a serious injury. Fujita, however, began to suffer them when he rolled over in his sleep.

"I might turn over too fast (in my sleep) and boom, give myself a stinger," he said in an interview given to The Daily Cal last year. "Someone calls my name on campus, I turn around and give myself a stinger. It was getting bad."

In the season when he had completed his rise to the starting team, Fujita had to sit out practice the final five weeks of the season, playing only on gamedays. Following a consultation with the Cal medical staff, it was discovered that Fujita had a condition in which four nerve roots in his spine were too narrow, causing the bone to pinch the nerves each time he turned his head or absorbed a hit.

The solution? Neck surgery.

A frightening prospect, but especially to a 21-year-old football player. After much deliberation and many discussions with his wife, Fujita went through with the surgery, which could very well have ended his career. The doctor didn't guarantee that Fujita would be able to play football, but "he pretty much guaranteed me I'd be ready for everyday life. That was the goal, just to be a healthy



Senior Scott Fujita could emerge as one of the top linebackers in college football this fall.

21-year-old kid," Fujita said prior to last season to The Daily Cal.

Not only did Fujita recover, but he got better. He received the Cal Player of the Week honor in his third game back, against Fresno State, helping to hold the Bulldogs to a mere 2.1 yards per carry. For the season, he racked up 41 tackles in Lyle Setencich's defense. Thirteen of his tackles were behind the line of scrimmage. His performance also earned him All-Pac-10 honorable mention.

On the academic side, Fujita was named to the Pac-10 All-Academic first team, finishing with a 3.4 GPA in political science and graduating this past May. He was also awarded the Verizon District VIII All-Academic award, along with Cal's Frank Storment Award, for being the outstanding student-athlete from southern California. This year, he working on his master's degree in education and is considering law school or going for an MBA.

All that, and he can still dunk.

Fujita won some national recognition for overcoming his neck injury (ESPN.com did a feature last fall), but is still widely unknown throughout college football. "I like the anonymity," he says. "I like being the underdog and surprising people. I'm just going to continue to be a hard worker, that's where I made a name for myself, just working hard, being consistent, being quiet about things. Just doing what I do."

It's football media day in early August of 2001, one day before practices begin at Cal. Fujita now stands tall, all of 6-5 and 255 pounds and is the most popular player in the room. He holds an empty glass in one hand, fielding question after question, even a television spot. How's the neck? One reporter asks. Feel's great, he says. Tired of talking about it? No, he says, with a slight smile. "It's just an obstacle that I have overcome, and I am proud that I have been able to overcome it. No problems at all, so I'm happy about that."

Fujita has grown up into a linebacker, a far cry from the bean pole his freshman year of high school. Yet, despite all he's done, he has yet to garner national recognition. He has, as a point of fact, only started for one full season at Cal. Setencich, who doubles as Fujita's linebacker coach, raved about his spring performance and hinted that he might evolve into a first round NFL pick next April. Mel Kiper Jr., an analyst for ESPN, believes that "Fujita should emerge as a top-drawer linebacker in the Pac-10" this season. So this feel-good story could have a feel-great ending? Our hero could become everyone's hero.

But you've already heard that one, right?

By Jack Gorman