

Ex-Saints LB Scott Fujita still has work to do in New Orleans: Scott Fujita donated some of his postseason winnings to the New Orleans area after leaving the Saints for the Browns.

By Jim Corbett, USA TODAY

Former New Orleans Saints linebacker Scott Fujita was instrumental in lifting a gritty team and city to Super Bowl XLIV-winning immortality. Next week, the Cleveland Browns free-agent addition will lead a more critical New Orleans-based defensive effort.

The 30-year-old linebacker will film several public service announcements spotlighting south Louisiana's endangered coastal wetlands key to protecting the city Fujita and wife Jaclyn fell in love with after his 2006 signing with the Saints. Fujita is dedicated to preserving the city's unique mélange of cultures and arts for the couple's 2-year-old twin daughters.

The Fujitas donated \$20,000 of his \$82,000 postseason earnings and will be joined by former teammates Drew Brees and Steve Gleason when he returns to New Orleans April 9 for a news conference spotlighting wetlands restoration.

"The city has come to mean so much to us," Fujita said. "This is where our daughters, Isabelle and Delilah, were born. We're always going to take them back because the culture of New Orleans has so much to offer. Preserving that is important to us."

Fujita was inspired by an IMAX film, *Hurricane on the Bayou*.

"I realized how integral the wetlands were as the city's main defense mechanism," Fujita said. "Every 45 minutes, New Orleans loses a football field worth of wetlands."

"Now that I'm on my way out, I'm almost ashamed I didn't do something sooner. The timing was right with the visibility of the Saints."

The Saints' 2009 Man of the Year signed a three-year, \$14-million deal March 7 with Cleveland.

"We've really only got about 10 years to get serious about re-introducing the Mississippi River into marshes to restore and rebuild them," said Aaron Viles of the Gulf Restoration Network.

"We're absolutely thrilled to be working with such a thoughtful and intentional athlete like Scott Fujita."

"People need to understand that all the work that's been done down here, all the federal investment and volunteer hours that have helped us come so far are all in jeopardy — unless and until we start re-building our natural lines of defense."

Fujita and Viles explain the wetlands and cypress swamps protecting New Orleans were built up over years by Mississippi River sediment and can be restored by the reintroduction of naturally-occurring river flooding changed by the levee system and shipping channels built for oil and gas production.

Fujita cited progress this month when the Obama Administration initiated an 18-month plan for Louisiana coastal wetlands restoration calling for re-introducing fresh water and sediment.

"A lot of it has to do with how the Mississippi River is mismanaged, now we're paying for it and it's becoming more and more clear how devastating it is," Fujita said. "The wetlands are just eroding over time."

Fujita also donated an additional \$21,000 to Haiti relief. Saints linebacker Jonathan Vilma's family hails from the earthquake-ravaged island country, and Fujita is also focused on providing help there.

"The problem isn't a lack of donations, it's allocating the resources the right way," Fujita said. "What's most critical before they get into the summer hurricane season, is having actual sustainable housing, contractors building things the right way."

Fujita said he'll never forget the three weeks of "Lombardi Gras" parades and parties honoring the Saints' Super Bowl championship.

"It was incredible. For a couple of weeks there, you felt like your feet never touched the ground," Fujita said. "Jaclyn and I were in Paris four years ago for the World Cup. We were in our hotel the night France beat Brazil to advance to the World Cup finals. The city just absolutely erupted.

"Hundreds of thousands of people were walking arm and arm and we got dressed up and went down to join in. It turned out to be millions of people all at the Arc de Triomphe signing national fight songs, celebrating their soccer victory. I said to myself, 'I don't know that you'll ever see something like that over a sporting event in the U.S.'"

Two months ago, Fujita got to live this country's equivalent down on the bayou he is now helping defend.

http://www.usatoday.com/sports/football/nfl/2010-03-29-scott-fujita_N.htm