

Fitzgerald battling to become one of NCAA's best

The Pittsburgh sophomore has excelled on the field despite recent losses of a friend and family member

By Norm Wood
Daily Press (KRT)

BLACKSBURG, Va. — The best wide receiver in college football is obsessed. Every night, Pittsburgh's Larry Fitzgerald can't get to sleep until he's sure he's tucked in with his two favorite footballs.

They represent links to his past and the unbelievably bright future that lies ahead.

One is a ball he has had since high school. It used to be the only ball that shared the bed with him, but just before he arrived at Pittsburgh, a friend gave him an official National Football League ball. The old beat-up high school ball had to make room.

"I kind of put that one in there to keep me motivated," said Fitzgerald of the NFL ball.

Motivation doesn't seem to be an issue with Fitzgerald. But if bunking with

football doesn't work, he has drawn enough inspiration and motivation from last spring to fuel him for years.

In April, Fitzgerald's mother, Carol, died after a seven-year struggle with cancer. It was the start of a spring that ended with Billy Gaines, a Panthers wide receiver and friend, died when he fell 25 feet through a church ceiling while intoxicated.

Fitzgerald withdrew into the sport that has always been there for him. The sport his mother allowed him to play football as a grade-school kid, even when Larry Sr., the sports editor at the Minnesota Spokesman-Recorder newspaper, told him he couldn't.

"Football throughout the season and the offseason last year, when everything was kind of happening, it was kind of like my outlet," the younger Fitzgerald said. "It was my safe haven from everything. It kind of deflected the pain and suffering I was going through at the time. I could go out here and work out. I was over there lifting weights five or six hours a day. The coaches had to run me out of there. That was where I felt com-

fortable, and I had people around me that really cared about me."

When preseason workouts began, Fitzgerald was ready to improve on the 69 catches for 1,005 yards and 12 touchdowns he amassed with the Panthers last season as a freshman. His weight-room diligence had given him an additional 15 pounds for his 6-foot-3 frame, which now carries 225.

Fitzgerald, a Heisman Trophy candidate, has 60 catches for 1,174 yards and 16 touchdowns in eight games. He leads the nation in receiving yards per game and scoring (12 points per game). He has set two NCAA records this season, one of them 14 consecutive games with a touchdown catch.

"He is as good a football player as I've ever been around," Pittsburgh coach Walt Harris said. "The one that's probably closest to him is when I was at Tennessee when Reggie White was there; and I was at Ohio State when Eddie George was there his senior year, when he won the Heisman. (Fitzgerald) is that dominant and that valuable, and he has helped us in ways that only a coach would know. He's a threat, and it

forces people to do certain things in order to give them the best chance (of defending against him)."

Even receivers of comparable size and stature marvel at Fitzgerald's abilities. Virginia Tech's Ernest Wilford, a 6-foot-4, 220-pounder, doesn't watch video of offensive players of other teams the Hokies play against. But he had to watch Fitzgerald.

"He's really good," said Wilford. "He's got good body control. He's got good footwork off the line of scrimmage, and he's got great hands. That's all you can ask for from a receiver."

That body control has been apparent since Fitzgerald was a youngster.

"Ever since I was a little kid, that's been the play," Fitzgerald said. "It's been 'just throw it up to Larry in the end zone' or 'just throw it up to Larry downfield.' That's pretty much been my trademark play."

The Hokies learned about Fitzgerald's ability to make acrobatic catches when he burned Vincent Fuller and Ronyell Whitaker for five catches, 105 yards and three touchdowns last season. Two of the touchdowns came on fade routes, when Fitzgerald used his 39-inch vertical leap to

pick the ball out of the air.

"Larry Fitzgerald is just the best I've ever seen at going up and getting the ball," Hokies coach Frank Beamer said. "He's got a big body, and it's a fast body, too. I think he has got a great knack of positioning his body against yours and going up and coming down with it. He's the best I've ever seen. We've played against a lot of great receivers over the years, but this guy is the best I've ever seen."

Larry Sr. can look back now and realize his wife Carol was right. Their son belongs in the game, and his obsession with it has been well-earned.

"He's always been a competitor, and he just wanted to play," Larry Sr. said. "When I first saw him play at (grade school) level, it was almost like there was a glow around him. He always stood out. He always seemed to be relaxed and had fun. I had a lot of fun watching him, even though I disagreed with his mother."

"Larry's a natural."

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LSU's Saban maintains he's not interested in NFL

Nick Saban said he is happy at LSU and does not have plans to jump to the NFL despite rumors he would

By David Haugh
Chicago Tribune (KRT)

CHICAGO — In NFL cities such as Chicago, where the head coach's seat couldn't get much hotter without setting off a smoke alarm, many fans like the idea of Louisiana State University coach Nick Saban taking over next season.

Apparently more than Saban likes the idea — at least for now.

During a speaking engagement Tuesday night in Mobile, Ala., the LSU coach tried to distance himself from speculation linking him to the Bears, Falcons, Giants or any other NFL team to which rumors will link him from now until the end of the season.

Asked about his interest in jumping to the NFL, Saban answered: "It comes down to this. Do you want to deal with a bunch of immature people or a bunch of college kids?"

LSU has an 8-1 record and is ranked No. 4 in the nation. Saban's

associates in the coaching profession have said he enjoys the lifestyle of college coaching and making a difference to young men. The university locked up Saban with a long-term contract that pays him \$1.6 million a year after Notre Dame rumors surfaced in 2001.

"The most difficult thing for human beings to do is to have the ability to sustain," Saban said in the Baton Rouge Advocate. "Most people's greatest regret in life is that they didn't get to finish something that was really important to them. If we have the desire and commitment to stay focused,

we can have a good football team every year."

It was the second time this season that Saban, 52, felt compelled to address rumors, the first coming last month after Bears general manager Jerry Angelo visited LSU's practice before the Bears played the Saints at the Superdome. Angelo coached the defensive line at Syracuse from 1975-79 and Saban coached linebackers there in 1977. The two have been good friends since, sparking the speculation that Angelo's campus visit fueled.

"The guy was doing his job," Saban told the paper. "He always has been a

personnel guy. He always has come to watch us practice every year since I've been here and every year that I was at Michigan State. He was looking at football players. It would be unfair to our players if I didn't allow every team to come in, and most teams come when they're playing the Saints."

Saban stressed he and Angelo have discussed only LSU players and that front-office personnel from other teams also have visited practice.

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