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TRIBUNE
JUN 14 2005

'Late Night'

WITH LARRY FITZGERALD

Locker room has become second home for receiver

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TRIBUNE

Long after his teammates had left for the day, "Late Night" would stay at the Arizona Cardinals' training complex.

Larry Fitzgerald had no pressing reason to head home to a near-empty house. He could only watch so many DVDs, play so many video games.

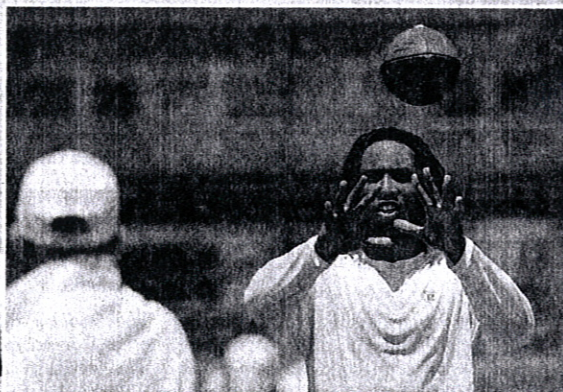
With little to do, the 21-year-old rookie receiver found it impossible not to bring work home with him, mulling why he wasn't playing better.

So he reverted to a comfort zone. The after-hours NFL locker room, a familiar area from his days as a Minnesota Vikings ballboy, was a refuge. Sometimes, while hanging out with the Cardinals' equipment staff,

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GOOD HANDS: Cardinals receiver Larry Fitzgerald, bottom left photo, catches a pass from assistant equipment manager Chris Collins last week.

TORU KAWANA,
TRIBUNE



FITZGERALD: Opening up more

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Fitzgerald would trade good-natured insults. Sometimes, the third pick in the 2004 NFL draft would help fold towels.

"We joke about it, that he's the most expensive equipment man in the league," assistant equipment manager Chris Collins said.

It was the equipment guys who hung the "Late Night" nickname on Fitzgerald — a name, and lifestyle, that Fitzgerald has no plans to retire.

But Fitzgerald, a self-described homebody, has made an effort to embrace more of the NFL life and mesh more in the locker room.

"I think he has finally realized it is OK to relax and let his hair down, if you will," defensive end Bertrand Berry said. "I think he is starting to embrace who he is and what his teammates mean to him."

FITTING IN

A week ago Monday, Fitzgerald invited a bunch of teammates to his house to watch Game 7 of the NBA Eastern Conference finals between Detroit and Miami, a move that had been out of the ordinary for him.

Fellow receiver Anquan Boldin took the opportunity to rip Fitzgerald for his lack of furniture, especially since Fitzgerald has been in the house since the beginning of last season.

"He's got too much money not to have no furniture," Boldin said, laughing.

Fitzgerald smiles at the thought, admitting he is picky about furniture — he wants it to be nice, but not too expensive. The man with more than \$16 million in the bank still takes food home from the facility every chance he gets.

"They all call me the cheapest dude in here," Fitzgerald said.

He has clearly become more comfortable around his teammates. A year in the league helps, as does the influx of players he knew in Minnesota as a ballboy, like safety Robert Griffith, cornerback Robert Tate and fullback Harold Morrow.

Fitzgerald has gone riding all-terrain four-wheelers with tackle Leonard Davis. And he appeared on the ESPN show "Teammates" with Berry.

Fitzgerald seemed like an odd choice for the game show styled around teammates knowing personal things about the other. But Berry and Fitzgerald talked some beforehand, and the two fared well.

"He is a very bright young man, he's got a good personality, and a lot of people might not know but he is very funny," Berry said. "I learned some things about him, he learned some things about me."

Having spent so much time around an NFL team growing up, Fitzgerald understands the dynamics of the locker room — one of the reasons he acted the way he did as a rookie. "Being a first-round (pick), your teammates, they have preconceived notions of you when you come in there," Fitzgerald said. "I couldn't imagine being a veteran guy playing seven years and you make 'X' amount of dollars and this young guy comes in, hasn't caught a pass, hasn't proven himself, and he makes the kind of money he makes."

"I just didn't want anyone to think anything was handed to me. That's why I work the way I work."

LIVING DOWN HISTORY

There was a subtext to Fitzgerald's rookie existence, one impossible to avoid. He was close with coach Dennis Green, who once did a radio show with Larry Fitzgerald Sr. and who saw Fitzgerald grow up around the Vikings.

The relationship didn't go unnoticed in the locker room.

"You can't say he's not Denny's kid," Griffith said. "He's one of Denny's guys. But I am one of Denny's guys."

"If you can play, it's all right. Now, if you are a marginal player and you're just around,

then it's a problem. ... It might be awkward at times, but he had a great (collegiate) year, damn near won the Heisman. (Having him) is justified."

Green emphasized Fitzgerald is a Cardinal because he saw the wideout as the best player coming out of college, not because he had known him for years.

Fitzgerald is confident the questions will slowly disappear over time.

"Everyone knows I know coach Green, but I just wanted to prove to them — and I think I already started to do it — that it wasn't a charity pick," Fitzgerald said. "He didn't bring me here because he liked me. He brought me here because I was a talented player. The longer I am here, (people) will really figure that out."

Green isn't Fitzgerald's only coaching contact. Defensive backs coach Richard Solomon, tight ends coach Carl Hargrave and strength coach Steve Wetzell, all of whom worked for Green in Minnesota, know Fitzgerald well.

Hargrave, one of Fitzgerald's confidants, said there was no way for Fitzgerald to understand the NFL life from a ballboy's perspective. Fitzgerald, who doesn't turn 22 until Aug. 31, understands that now.

Not surprisingly, any difficulties he had were tied to performance on the field. He won't talk much of any on-field problems he might have had, only to say that he was disappointed in a decent rookie year of 58 catches for 780 yards and eight touchdowns.

Quarterback Josh McCown said he has already noticed a difference in Fitzgerald's improved attention to detail running routes.

"I told him, 'Man, they paid you a lot of money, and they expect you to be on the field and play at a high level,'" McCown said. "He understands that."

"Some of the stuff he can do off his natural ability can still get him by in the NFL, but (working on other things), it's like his personality, it may not be natural for him, but it's probably the best thing for him."

So some things Fitzgerald will change. But not everything.

"Late Night" Larry will still show his respect for the equipment guys and help out when he can after all the other players have left. Even if his game gets better, there's a good chance he'll fold a towel some time this season.

"I wake up every morning, come here to work and it hits me, I am playing football for a living," Fitzgerald said. "I am living a dream."

EXTRA POINT: Running back Troy Hambrick remains absent from organized team workouts.

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