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Football Doesn't Define Luis Castillo

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"Football no me define."

The Spanish sentence comes fluidly, but passionately from Luis Castillo.

Born in Brooklyn, N.Y., the 25-year-old San Diego Chargers defensive end spent his first five years as a child growing up in the Dominican Republic. Though Castillo now resides in San Diego, he said he still receives a welcome fitting of a national hero when he returns to visit the Dominican.

"The love I've gotten from that country for playing a sport they don't have another representative in has been something truly amazing, special and unbelievable," Castillo said. "It humbles me to think of how much love I've received for something that not all of them even understand."



On the set of the NFL PLAYERS photo shoot for the "Football Doesn't Define Me" branding campaign, Castillo opens up about his Hispanic ties while wearing a dark pin-striped suit. Visibly relaxed as he reflects on his heritage, the first-round draft pick said it's important to him to return to the Dominican Republic at least once a year. He goes during the offseason with his mother, Maria, who came from a small village there and grew up without running water or electricity.

"It's just such a beautiful country," he said of the proud nation his mother calls home. "You see so much charisma, so much personality. It's a stunning place with great food."

The four-year pro speaks of his mother in a soft, respectful voice. The woman who gave birth to him at the age of 40 raised him alone in Garfield, N.J., after immigrating to the United

States with only a 5th-grade education.

Determined to succeed at an early age, Castillo flourished at Garfield High School in countless areas. He was an athletic standout earning football MVP accolades while lettering in track and wrestling. In the classroom, he was just as accomplished, and was a member of the Math Honor Society, National Honor Society and Honor Roll.

Before Castillo goes into further detail about how his mother helped to shape the person he has become today, he poses for the photographer against a red and yellow mural wall in a tan suit. While his orange and purple paisley tie and vivid background would appear to compete for the camera's attention, it is Castillo's genuine grin which is the focus of the frames.

Castillo is then quick to note that he owes achievements like these to his mother's hard work, which he says provided him with countless opportunities for success.

"Because she dedicated so much to me, I'm accountable to her," Castillo explained. "I'm accountable to her to make sure I take every opportunity and make the best of it, because she worked very hard to give me an education."

On the set, Castillo made this commitment visible. He first walked around the room, surveying the silver words on the white wall; they are the phrases and words of his peers, those who participated in the 2007 NFL PLAYERS branding campaign. Now, Castillo is ready to make his own mark. Pouring red paint into his tray, he selects a little sponge roller, meticulously writing "ACCOUNTABILITY" in large, block letters on the make-shift canvas.

Castillo, who attended Northwestern University, a school more known for its rigorous academics than its gridiron prowess has always held himself accountable. An economics major, Castillo posted a 3.5 GPA during his tenure as a Wildcat and was named an academic All-American.

"The legacy can't just be the football player," Castillo said when asked about his excellence in the classroom. "There are many things I want to do afterward, and I always wanted to be prepared for that time. It goes back to being accountable. If I had a test or homework, I was going to get the job done."

The photo shoot next takes the 6-foot-3, 290-pounder to a hotel rooftop, where the familiar San Diego skyline serves as the scenic background. Castillo transitions well to the California casual look, sporting a green polo shirt with khaki cargo pants and loafers.

Like many of his peers in the NFL, Castillo overcame obstacles in his quest to play on Sundays. However, it is the difference in these challenges which have defined Castillo's path. Only the second player of Dominican heritage to be drafted and start in the league, Castillo was selected as the cover athlete for the Spanish-language version of Madden NFL '08.

"That was a special honor," Castillo said. "I remember playing Madden growing up, and when I'd make my player on the video game, I'd think, 'Castillo? That's not the last name of any NFL player.' I thought I'd have to change my name if I ever got lucky enough to play in the real NFL."

Instead, the Spanish-fluent Castillo now uses his name and image to inspire other Hispanic



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youths. He has helped facilitate football camps in both Mexico and the Dominican Republic.

"We have to continue to do everything we can, especially as Hispanic players and role models, to show them it isn't a matter of where you come from," he elaborated. "It doesn't matter what nationality you are, how much money your family might or might not have, but really, that you can achieve anything you want. You set your own limits."

For his efforts, he was awarded the 2008 Roberto Clemente Award for Sports Excellence. However, Castillo says he hopes to make a greater impact on Hispanic youth than just showing them they, too, can play on Sundays. He hopes to inspire them to excel in all facets of life.

"I've had a lot of opportunities to interact with kids," Castillo said. "But it shouldn't be about letting them hang out with a football player. I want them to see how I treat my family and friends and to see the integrity and honesty I try and live my life with. Those are the things that are important."

To unlock the unique phrases, images and exclusive footage from Castillo's photo shoot in the 2008 NFL PLAYERS branding campaign, go to NFLPLAYERS.COM/REAL.

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