

Castillo is desperate, but only to keep improving in his third year

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Sweat poured off the tip of Luis Castillo's nose, any doubts about his readiness for this season cascading away with the perspiration. His giant calves strained as he jumped and lunged. His breathing was heavy, but his breaks were brief.

“Rest,” was the constant exhortation from trainer Vince Gabriel.

Forget it. On a summer day just a few degrees shy of searing last month, Castillo rushed from exercise to exercise as he and Gabriel worked out at a Poway park not far from Castillo's home.

When Gabriel asked him what he had already done that day, Castillo was coy. Gabriel never got the real story: that by the time they met for an hour of torture, Castillo had already run with teammates for an hour at Chargers Park, lifted weights for 90 minutes and worked on the elliptical machine for 20 minutes.

“Because he does work so hard I have to curb what he does,” Gabriel said. “He does so much outside of this.”

Funny that Castillo began a conversation a few months ago talking about how he was “just kicking back” this offseason.

Demands on time

Castillo is torn in the same way as a lot of young star athletes, especially those with winning personalities and looks to go along with their game.



K.C. ALFRED / Union-Tribune
Tethered by giant rubber bands, Luis Castillo pushes through a pre-training camp resistance workout in Scripps Ranch.

“There is so much going on,” he said. “You realize it's a business. Every player is his own business.”

Like many top players, Castillo has a public relations firm working to promote him. The PR staff sets up endorsements and interviews and photo shoots. Teammates, current and past, call for favors – a bowling tournament in Vegas, a dinner in L.A., a camp in New York.

“It's tough,” Castillo said. “You've got a friend doing a football camp in the Bahamas. And it's a legitimate deal. It's a cool thing. And most of the time, I'm there. But it adds up, and you realize you're taking four trips a month.

“You don't see it as partying. It's just events you should be doing. But it's a lot of not being home, and you're flying a lot, and it just wears on you. This whole offseason, I'm just like, 'Let me take it easy.’ ”

He did attend ESPN's ESPY awards, and he held his inaugural football camp in the Dominican Republic as well as attending a couple of charity dinners.

A favorite of the Chargers community relations staff, he made numerous appearances for the team. In fact, teammates laugh as they tell stories of how he never turns down an autograph request and extends their time at public appearances by engaging every member of every family in conversation. And, of course, he can be charming in English and Spanish.

But he also turned down several requests for appearances out of town. Instead, he was in San Diego. . . resting.

“At the end of the day I'm just a football player,” he said. “I can give up all the other stuff.”

Sophomore setback

Castillo entered last season – his second in the NFL – feeling stronger, quicker, more confident and ready to turn potential into productivity. He had been so close to being so good his rookie season, but he felt he needed to take a giant step in 2006.

He had lost 10 pounds, to 285. He had learned a lot about himself, how those around him played and about offenses. His improved technique earned him praise from coaches and veteran teammates.

Through most of eight games, Castillo was churning from his defensive end slot. But in getting his fifth sack of the season, Castillo badly sprained his ankle Nov. 6 against the Cleveland Browns. The injury kept him out of six of the next eight games, and he started just once more



K.C. ALFRED / Union-Tribune
Working up a sweat is never a problem for Castillo in his private sessions.

and again in the playoff game. He did get two more sacks and was voted a second alternate to the Pro Bowl.

“I expected myself to have 10 sacks,” he said.

Mostly, he was upset he didn't come through – with a sack, with a tackle, with a hurry – some of the times he was put in position to do so.

The season was a loss in his eyes, and as the offseason started he thought it might be even worse.

He had never been injured so severely and was worried when he still couldn't run in March. He pestered members of the team's medical staff wondering what he should do.

Rest, they told him.

He did. Defensive line coach Wayne Nunnely praised Castillo back in April for heeding that advice and allowing the ankle to heal.

But as soon as it did, Castillo could not be slowed.

“I felt like I had some catching up to do,” he said one June afternoon, relaxing by his pool after a workout. “I'm scared to let things fall off from last year. I felt in great shape physically. I felt good. I go into the season, everything is dealing. Everything is going the right way. I'm making plays, getting sacks. The season was going the way I wanted it to. I don't want to get to the point where I fall off. I don't want to in the middle of the season feel like I should have done more in the offseason.”

Castillo is not supposed to be Shawne Merriman or even Shaun Phillips. And his job differs from that of Jamal Williams. But he does know he was a first-round draft pick in 2005, and his performance so far has just teased at what he is capable of.

“More than ever I feel like there are a lot of expectations,” Castillo said. “I was OK my rookie year, but nobody really knew how good I could be.”

Castillo recalls Nunnely telling him late in last year's training camp, “There is no way you shouldn't have double-digit sacks this year.”

Now, Castillo said, “This year, that's not something that is an anomaly. That's where I should be.”

So besides the physical work he has done, he has spent much time in a dark room.

One day in June, Castillo put off a scheduled meeting in part because he needed to fit film-watching into his afternoon. Hours upon hours of film. In June.

He has spent the offseason watching himself in 2005 and '06 to see where any slight improvement might be made, as well as viewing the handiwork of Trevor Pryce, Tommie Harris and John Randle.

“It's the pressure of going into my third season,” Castillo said. “If you're a Pro Bowler your rookie season, you really did something. Then comes your second year. Then your third. If you're going to get to that point in your career, it's the time to do it.”

Wanted: more burst

What Castillo has figured out is that he has not been quick enough off the line.

He had two themes this offseason, both having to do with momentum, figuratively and literally:

“What can I do to make sure I don't take a step back from where I was before I got hurt last year?”

“How can I improve my get-off?”

The one step by which he often misses making a huge play is not at the end. He is freakishly fleet for a man his size. His tardiness stems from his beginning.

“The thing I've been struggling with is my get-off,” he said. “It's a shame. I'm so quick, but if you're already a step behind that's not good. You think about so many other things, you forget to really concentrate on that get-off. Even when I'm watching film now, I'm looking at the ball a lot more. I'm thinking about it a lot more because I'm doing so much stuff with it all week long.”

In addition to working out with the team, Castillo worked with Gabriel two or three times or more a week.

On this day, not once in an hour did Gabriel prod Castillo. He was more of a guide, putting the brakes on his client as much as leading him through a series of twisted stretches and exercises.

As he watched Castillo pretzel his way through one stretch, on the balls of his feet to one side and then his heels to the other, Gabriel was clearly impressed.

“Real good,” he said. “Even the little guys can't do that.”

Castillo's shirt was a wet mop midway through the workout.

“I've been so sick all week,” he said, pausing to forcefully clear out his nose several times during the workout.

Many of the exercises Castillo does with Gabriel are designed to increase his burst. In a park where teenage girls giggled nearby, boys played baseball and moms pushed strollers along a path, Castillo was jumping two feet in the air when Gabriel snapped a ball. He was lunging forward with one end of a giant rubber band attached around his shoulders and the other

encircled around a tree trunk when Gabriel snapped the ball. He was running in short bursts when Gabriel snapped the ball.

“You want to feel like you can make the big play when the team needs you,” Castillo said. “Sometimes it's just about coming out here and feeling like you're doing more than normal. I was really worried I was a step slower than last year, because of the injury. But it's been a good summer.”

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