



One of the biggest hurdles for Dodger coach Juan Castro during his early playing days in the 1990s was overcoming a language barrier.

FOUND IN TRANSLATION

Dodgers push to make U.S. adjustment easier for international players

BY BOB HARKINS

Juan Castro knew he would have a big adventure ahead of him when he signed with the Los Angeles Dodgers in the summer of 1991, just two days shy of his 19th birthday.

But he didn't know just how challenging the transition would be when he left his hometown of Los Mochis, Mexico — a city of a quarter million, just off the Gulf of California — and traveled roughly 2,000 miles north to the Dodgers' Rookie League team in Great Falls, Montana.

Castro quickly found that the culture was different and the rules were different. And even though he had taken English classes in high school, he was pretty lost when it came to the language, too.

"To be honest, my first week I wanted to go back to Mexico," said Castro. "I felt bad. I didn't understand anything and I didn't

know what was going on. I was on a team filled with American guys, and my coach was American so I couldn't understand anything that they were saying."

Largely left to handle it all on his own, Castro worked hard to hasten his adjustment. He took English classes regularly and bought a book to study on his own time. He asked a lot of questions not only to understand the language, but also the culture.

"I know a lot of guys had a problem with that," said Castro, who capped a 17-year big-league career in 2011 and is now the Dodgers' quality assurance coach. "They didn't want to make the transition. They wanted to do it their own way. But I think at the end, if you want to have success in this country, you have to follow what they want you to do."





The Dodgers have Japanese and Spanish translators on staff to help players such as Kenta Maeda and Julio Urias.

Things have changed a lot since then, as the Dodgers have made a concerted effort to help their international players transition to the U.S. Some of the changes have been obvious, such as full-time translators to help Japanese pitcher Kenta Maeda and Korean pitcher Hyun-Jin Ryu, as well as the team's Spanish-speaking players.

But it goes well beyond that. The Dodgers are aggressive about helping their international signees as soon as they arrive at their Campo Las Palmas academy in the Dominican Republic, and also every step of the way as they move into the minor leagues.

The education efforts go well beyond English lessons, as some players, typically ages 16-18 when they arrive, haven't attended school since they were 10. They live and breathe baseball, but there is much to learn before suddenly being thrust into the American culture.

"These guys are developing life skills beyond just the cultural acclimation part," Dodger senior manager of player development Matt McGrath said. "For us, it's as much developing them as men as it is culturally or language-wise.

"We're trying to make them stronger men, give them the ability to communicate across languages with teammates.

That makes everybody better. That's the ultimate goal of what we're trying to do."

The education continues in the minors once players depart the academy. There are English lessons, of course, but also Spanish lessons for English-speaking players — players of different cultures put together in the same classroom, making themselves vulnerable to each other and building camaraderie.

"English speakers and Spanish speakers are in one classroom and half of it is guys teaching one another," McGrath said. "It's



Dodger minor-leaguer and Dominican Republic native Luis DePaula of Single-A Rancho Cucamonga spoke at a local elementary school, as part of the Dodgers' transitioning program.



Dodger director of player development Gabe Kapler (left, with president and CEO Stan Kasten) has placed a high level of importance on off-the-field aid for minor leaguers.

beneficial from an educational standpoint, but from a team-building standpoint it's unbelievable."

Beyond classroom education, there is a push to get players out into the communities in which they play, including organized visits to YMCAs and local youth groups. It shows them how important it is to be a Dodger and the environment they are going into.

The buy-in from players has been noticeable, McGrath said, especially since the arrival of director of player development Gabe Kapler in late 2014 and coordinator of international player development Duncan Webb the following spring. Players are engaged in the classroom and the community, and many are eagerly taking advantage of the educational and cultural help the team is giving them.

Take 21-year-old catcher Daniel Canelas, whose previous knowledge of English came from watching cartoons while growing up in Venezuela. Canelas, who is currently injured, is using his time while rehabbing in Arizona to study for his GED.

"He's really embraced it and is going to

go out there and take the test and see if that's a fallback option beyond baseball," McGrath said.

This is an important aspect to player development, and is something the team sees as a responsibility to the players.

"In many ways, our job is just to support them on and off the field and to get them all the resources possible to help them navigate the world effectively," Kapler said. "This is critical. It's something we spend an extraordinary amount of time attempting to figure out."

And they're still working to improve things even more. They don't want players to go through what Castro did when he first arrived in Great Falls, wishing he could return home within the first week. They want players to want to stay, to grow, to thrive. They want players to understand what it's about to be a Dodger.

"Our guys are buying into being a part of the Dodger organization," McGrath said. "They want to be all in, not just that guy from the Dominican who doesn't speak any English. They want to be a full-on Dodger."