

Making Waves: The Gabe Castano Story

By: Eric Fenstermaker

STATE COLLEGE, Pa. – One second to the average person is nothing.

To swimmer Gabe Castano, .05 seconds is the difference between success and failure.

Castano was born in Monterrey, Mexico, and moved to Allentown, Pennsylvania, when he was 11 years old.

The 24-year-old didn't grow up a swimmer. In fact, he didn't dive into the sport until freshman year of high school.

Instead, inspired by his father's love of biking and motorcycles, Castano took to competitive cycling and started swimming as a way to train during the winter.

Luis Castano, his father, said his son almost never even swam at all.

"[Gabe] was not a swimmer," Castano said. "He had no interest in swimming before then, and he was very close to not even doing it."

During high school, Castano fell in love with swimming. He became fueled by his passion to constantly improve his times.

"For me, it was [kind of] addicting in a way," Castano said.

Castano developed as a swimmer throughout high school becoming a three-time state champion. He then chose to move on and compete at Penn State.

At Penn State, Castano continued to push himself, and he also served as a leader and mentor for other swimmers.

Juliusz Gosieniecki is a medically retired Penn State swimmer from Wielkopolska, Poland. Gosieniecki said Castano's Mexican background and understanding of different cultures helped him get acclimated in America.

"It's definitely nice having this relationship of having a 'brother picture' and being from two parts of the world," Gosieniecki said. "I feel like that's why we have bonded pretty well."

The two sprinters met their first day on campus, and Gosieniecki said their competitive friendship has pushed them both to become better athletes.

Castano continued to excel and grow as a swimmer, etching his name into the record books at Penn State both as an individual competitor and on relays.

While he continued to do well at Penn State, Castano soon became inspired to chase more records – this time, in Mexico.

After realizing how close he was to setting records, Castano began to train and compete in his home country.

He would go on to become a Mexican national champion in both the 50m freestyle and 100m freestyle and set the Mexican record for the former at 22.2 seconds.

Castano then focused on a new goal: getting to Tokyo, Japan, for the 2021 Olympics.

Inspired by the Rio Olympics in 2016, Castano began exploring how he could reach swimming's biggest stage. Going into college, Castano said he never dreamed of the Olympics.

“I never, ever, really saw [the Olympics] as an option because at the time I was so far behind that it wasn't even close to a possibility,” Castano said.

Simply being a Mexican record holder wouldn't be enough to secure Castano a spot in the Tokyo Olympics.

Castano would need to travel to competitions and record an “A cut,” meaning he would beat or match the time of the 14th best swimmer in the 50m freestyle from the last Olympics.

Looking to secure his spot, Castano traveled to Europe to compete in the Mare Nostrum – a series of three different swimming competitions in Monaco, Spain and France.

After dealing with flight restrictions, numerous coronavirus tests, quarantines and other barriers – not to mention paying for everything on his own – Castano was finally able to compete.

However, after competing in all three races, Castano still didn't qualify.

Castano came back to the United States and had one last destination, California, where he could hit the mark.

The meet in California was structured differently than most with the day consisting of three races instead of two.

Needing even better than his best, Castano smashed his own record of 22.2 seconds each race going 22.18, 22.12 and 22.06. However, he was still .05 seconds off the pace needed to make the Olympics.

With one last time trial just two days later, Castano said he had no expectations.

With nothing to lose, Castano achieved his best time ever of 22.01 – the exact time he needed to go to Tokyo.

Castano's father said his son's work ethic and determination is what pushed him to success.

“[Gabe] will do whatever to win the medal and to be the best and to break that record,” Castano said. “He won’t sleep well if he doesn’t [succeed].”

Castano celebrated by talking with family members and close friends, but he didn’t have much time to relax. The Olympics started exactly one month from when Castano hit his time.

Traveling to Tokyo with two fellow Mexican teammates, Castano had a unique schedule while preparing for the games.

Since he is a sprinter, Castano’s training didn’t take long — usually only practicing for an hour or two each day — which meant he often had long periods of time away from the pool.

Also, both of Castano’s teammates competed days before him, so while he was preparing to compete, his teammates were relaxing.

On Friday, July 30th, Castano swam a 22.32 to place 30th out of 73 swimmers.

While he couldn’t compete in a packed stadium of cheering fans or in front of his family, Castano said he is thankful for the opportunity and loved the experience.

So, now that Castano has competed on the world’s biggest stage, what’s next?

He doesn’t know yet.

Graduating in spring 2022 with a degree in labor and employment relations, Castano has a choice to make – either dedicating himself to swimming full time or exploring some of his business ideas, such as opening a gym or running swimming clinics.

Castano likes helping others get better at swimming, and he has gone back to Mexico and helped with some clinics.

“I like being a part of the swim community and getting my expertise out there,” Castano said.

Castano’s father even labeled his son a “mini celebrity,” saying the kids view his son as a role model and admire him.