

Joe Starkey: Alejandro Villanueva's story never ceases to amaze

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By Joe Starkey / Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

It will be a movie someday. It has to be.

Alejandro Villanueva refuses to use the word “amazing,” but I will — and I’m not even talking about the heroic military parts. I’m talking strictly about the post-college football part. Like the fact that even though he went four years without playing a down, he not only made the league but established himself as a bona fide left tackle protecting Ben Roethlisberger’s blind side.

So in the wake of Villanueva signing that \$24 million contract last week, let’s focus on the football part. And for now let’s set aside everything else — the day he was fired in Philadelphia, the \$350 he spent to get that opportunity, the crazy people he met at the NFL’s last-chance saloon — and travel back six years in time. To a tiny U.S. Army helicopter landing zone in Afghanistan.

HLZ football, they called it. Two-hand touch. Ten Mississippi. The only kind of football Villanueva would play from 2010-14. This was during his first deployment, with the United States Army’s 10th Mountain Division.

I’d heard the HLZ games were played on concrete.

“No, it was gravel. Big chunks of gravel,” Villanueva recalled Thursday in Latrobe, his eyes lighting at he memory. “It was a way of me bonding with my guys, because I really loved them to death. They were my brothers. And everybody loves football.”

He added, matter-of-factly, that “sometimes there was shooting, and we’d have to get down and cancel the game and continue later.”

Perhaps it goes without saying that the games could get pretty competitive.

“It became very controversial, so I became sort of like a quarterback, referee and coach at the same time,” Villanueva said. “To this day, it’s really special, actually. I get to bring some of the guys I played with in here

to visit.”

Or he visits them. One friend is a Boston-area policeman. Villanueva had breakfast with him when the Steelers played the Patriots in the AFC championship game.

“I try to convey to them — and it is true — that playing those games with them in Afghanistan, under those conditions, is a lot more special than playing a championship game against the Patriots,” Villanueva said. “You’re in a foreign country, playing with a ball that isn’t even fully inflated. Half the players have a dip in their mouths. It was a really special time in my life.”

Before he was deployed, in 2010, Villanueva was invited to Cincinnati Bengals rookie camp. He wore No. 86 and played tight end for five days, knowing it was just a quick audition. He was committed to his Army career.

He didn’t surrender his NFL dream. He just tucked it away. And when he returned to the states in 2013, after his third deployment in Afghanistan, he was more than willing to plunk down the \$350 required to participate in something called the NFL’s “Super Regional Combine.”

The Super Regional was more or less a last-chance saloon for wannabes and never-weres. A group of thousands, including a 34-year-old safety, auditioned regionally before the field was cut to 241 for the final performance at Ford Field in Detroit.

“Oh my God,” Villanueva said. “That was an adventure. You had guys screaming they were doubted and should have been first-round picks. There was a guy carrying a full-sized cross. And I didn’t do very well.”

Perhaps not. But he was still nearly 6 feet 10 with athletic ability and room to fill out. Chip Kelly, whose motto was “bigger people beat up little people,” took a chance, and Villanueva wound up playing defensive end in Eagles camp in 2014. But not for long.

On Aug. 23 of that year, at 11:08 a.m., Eagles reporter Reuben Frank tweeted out the following: “Alejandro Villanueva and Carey Spear have left the NovaCare Complex with their stuff in garbage bags. Looks like first cuts of the day.”

Villanueva smiled when I relayed that tweet to him.

“It was raining. It was terrible,” he said. “It was the most stereotypical you’ve-been-fired sort of day. I didn’t think I was going to get cut. I do have this Michael Scott [”The Office”] mentality that all things around me are going very well. I guess I have a very positive image of me, but clearly my status with the team and my efforts during the preseason — playing the last 10 plays of each game — were not enough. I was the first person to get cut.”

So off he went, garbage bag and all, to his in-laws in Maryland, where he always goes in times of trouble. The Army was telling him that without an NFL contract he might have to go back to active duty, but he'd given up his leadership post in his regiment in order to take what he terms a "slim-to-none" shot at the NFL.

The in-laws had no wi-fi service, so Villanueva headed to the public library and put his resume through an Army job-finding service.

Meanwhile, his agent sent a note to the other 31 teams. One called. The Steelers. They had been impressed with Villanueva in a preseason game against the Eagles. He came to Pittsburgh for a workout. The brain trust deemed him too slow to play defense or tight end, so they put him in the offensive line room.

He never left.

Villanueva figures the Steelers were his last shot — even if the Steelers didn't know that.

"I think they felt like they wanted to keep me for a year and didn't want me to sign with any other team," he said. "They thought maybe I was a sought-after practice-squad candidate, but in reality nobody else called. They were the only team that showed any level of interest."

I had to ask linemate David DeCastro if he thought Villanueva would make it this far.

"I think it's hard to tell when you first meet a guy, but once you get to know him, you're not surprised at all," DeCastro said. "I've become good friends with Al. His demeanor, his work ethic — an almost crazy drive to be great — is pretty impressive and has taken him pretty far in life."

Not that Villanueva is satisfied. Or secure. He also is the type who believes anything could go wrong at any moment, so he is continuing his pursuit of an MBA at Carnegie Mellon University just in case. He's also enjoying life at home with his wife, Maddy, and two young children, a boy and girl.

Quite the story, yes? And that's only part of it. And he's still only 28.

"My mindset," Villanueva said, "has always been to forget what everyone's thinking of me or whatever everybody's hoping I do and concentrate on the task at hand — but sort of have a big vision for later things in my life, so I'm not peaking at the moment, I'm peaking in the future.

"I'm not at the top of the mountain yet. I've still got to climb up some more."

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