



N E L S O N C R U Z

By Nina Zimmerman

Speak Softly and Carry a BOOMSTICK

For Twins slugger Nelson Cruz, goodness—in both word and deed—is a crucial thread of who he is, holding him together like the 108 stitches that bind a baseball.

The 40-year-old slugger is known as much for his exploits on the field—six All-Star selections, three Silver Sluggers and 400+ career home runs, to name a few—as he is for his generous spirit and commitment to improving the world around him.

“There’s really nothing you could say about him that’s short of spectacular,” Twins manager Rocco Baldelli said.

“He’s an iconic figure not only for what he has accomplished on the field, but obviously what he means to the community and his hometown and the whole country,” said third base coach Tony Diaz, who, like Cruz, hails from the Dominican Republic. “His contributions are second to none.”

Years of dedication to bettering his country and the communities in which he’s played were recognized on June 21, when Cruz was named the winner of the 2020 Muhammad Ali Sports Humanitarian Award at the 2020 ESPYS. The honor, handed out annually since 2015, is given to the athlete whose continuous, demonstrated leadership has created a measured positive impact on their community through sports, and who embodies Muhammad Ali’s core principles of confidence, conviction, dedication,

giving and respect. As the winner, Cruz will receive a \$100,000 grant from ESPN for his Boomstick23 Foundation.

“I definitely feel blessed,” Cruz said. “Never in my dreams did I feel like I was going to win this. I don’t think we do it to be recognized. We do it because we feel it’s the right thing to do. That is what our heart is telling us to do. It’s always nice to be recognized that what you are doing is the right thing.”

Cruz is the epitome of one whose athletic success is just the beginning of his true impact. This is the story of a man who speaks softly and carries a Boomstick.

Donado por Nelson Cruz

In Cruz’s hometown of Las Matas De Santa Cruz, DR, four words in big, bold lettering adorn the sides of a fire truck, an ambulance, police motorcycles and police trucks: “Donado por Nelson Cruz”—donated by Nelson Cruz.

“If you can be good at playing baseball, you should be good also with the community,” Cruz said.

When Cruz was young, his parents instilled in him a belief that no matter how much or how little you have, there’s always room to give—a value that has driven him from the beginning of his career. By his own approximation, in 2000 or 2001 Cruz began col-

lecting his own and his teammates' discarded baseball equipment at the end of each season and donating it to the youth of Las Matas De Santa Cruz.

Cruz's shift from baseball gear to emergency vehicles began in earnest in 2011, when the home of a close friend burned down due to the lack of a local firetruck to respond. His eventual acquisition of the truck, along with firefighter gear, paralleled his journey as a ballplayer. The firetruck, which arrived in Las Matas De Santa Cruz in 2012, came with help from the Texas Rangers organization, where Cruz played from 2006-13, and the Arlington, TX fire department; the gear was later donated by the Seattle Fire Department, who Cruz engaged with as a member of the Mariners from 2015-18. After the firetruck, Cruz later donated an ambulance, helped build a police station and donated several police motorcycles and a truck.

"The ambulance is the one that I'm really proud of, because we're saving lives," Cruz said. "We take for granted this stuff, because in the states we have it everywhere."

Cruz's rising star on the field paved the way for philanthropic growth off the field. His Boomstick23 Foundation launched in September 2016, during a season in which he was the Mariners' winner of the MLBPA's Heart and Hustle award. The foundation's aim is to empower young people in vulnerable circumstances through sports and education, enhancing their quality of life and giving them tools to succeed no matter the circumstances. Though it operates primarily in the Dominican Republic and specifically Las Matas De Santa Cruz, Cruz has included foundation activities in the markets he's played in since its founding—first in Seattle and now Minnesota.

It's hard to find an avenue for giving that Cruz hasn't explored. He's involved with Players for the Planet, a group dedicated to uniting athletes and creating positive change for a wide range of environmental causes. Cruz's focus hits close to home—cleaning the beaches and oceans that surround his island home.

"We only have one planet, and I live on an island, so plastics and pollution affect us pretty good," Cruz said.

In 2015, Cruz became a spokesman for Aid for AIDS International, an organization focused on empowering communities at risk for HIV, and recently joined its Healing Venezuela initiative, which helps 2,000 Venezuelan newborns annually receive life-sustaining nourishment during their first year of life (a 400% increase since his involvement). In 2019, Cruz's charitable activities included raising funds for the Education Center in Monte Cristi province (the DR province where Cruz's hometown is) through the Big League Impact ALL WIN campaign, and hosting a vitilla (Dominican stickball) clinic with RBI All-Stars on Nicollet Mall in Downtown Minneapolis.

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His annual work in Las Matas De Santa Cruz includes donating wheelchairs, crutches, walkers and canes for elderly and disabled residents, as well as bringing in dentists and optometrists, armed with donated equipment and medicine, to the local clinic to provide checkups, medicine and eyewear. These efforts garnered Cruz the Twins' 2019 Carl R. Pohlad Community Service Award, as well as the Star Tribune's 2019 Sportsperson of the Year honor.

Leading by example

The middle child and only son of schoolteachers Nelson Sr. and Dominga, Cruz attended the same school where his parents worked, putting the spotlight on him from an early age. When Cruz signed with the New York Mets as a 17-year-old in January 1998, Nelson Sr. had one demand; he told scout Eddy Toledo that Nelson Jr. had to finish his studies and graduate from school before reporting to the Mets' Dominican academy. The message was clear: education matters.

From a baseball standpoint, Cruz was a late bloomer. His main sport growing up was basketball, and, despite baseball's place

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in the Dominican consciousness, he didn't start playing the sport seriously until his late teens. After signing with the Mets in 1998, Cruz was traded twice, from the Mets to the A's in 2000 and from the A's to the Brewers in 2004. In 2005, he finally made his major league debut with Milwaukee, but his first stint in the Midwest lasted just eight MLB games, as the Brewers sent him and Carlos Lee to Texas in a deal on July 28, 2006. Cruz took a few years to find his place with the Rangers, including three years of inconsistency at the plate that nearly resulted in a

conversion to pitcher. He persevered, earning his first All-Star selection in 2009, and has been a regular in the majors ever since.

"Once I (realized) it was easier to be myself—it doesn't mean quit learning, but you just have to be you, regardless, to be good," Cruz said. "I wasn't gifted to have that much talent, I worked to have the talent that I have."

Cruz lives this ethos of hard work and perseverance, of character and an openness to learn. He leads primarily by deed, rather than by word. In the offseason, he invites others to work out with him, from current and former teammates to prospects

trying to find their place. His compound in Las Matas De Santa Cruz has a gym, built in 2010, and a batting cage, added to the facility in 2011, in addition to the fields nearby for outdoor work. When former Rangers teammate and fellow Dominican Ronald Guzmán struggled, he knew where to turn.

"Nelson is a machine. That guy just doesn't stop. It's 24/7," Guzmán said. "We'd wake up at nine, we hit in the cages, then we hit on the field, then we come back and work out. We'd rest three hours, and then we go hit again. Just a whole day of practice—every single day but Sundays."

This dedication in the gym, in the cage and on the field have prolonged Cruz's career and are another way in which he sets an example for the next generation of ballplayers.

"That's about as perfect as you can get, as far as someone taking care of their body and doing the right things," said Glen Freeman, Cruz's strength and conditioning coach. "He tries to implement that same mentality to all of the young guys that come to his camp."

"That's why I have so much respect for him, because he doesn't have to do it, but he does. He's such a good guy, and he's humble. That's rare."

"He tries to make you do the right thing, and teach you the right way," former teammate Jonathan Schoop said. "Just follow him, and you'll be good."

This past January, Cruz stopped by the Twins' Dominican Academy in Boca Chica, worked out and talked to the players about everything from swing analyses to advice on daily routine.

"Some of the younger guys said that for them having a guy that they've been looking at his career for a long time, it's like a dream come true," Twins Director of Latin America Scouting and U.S. Integration Fred Guerrero said.

"He's an idol," said Twins prospect Jhoan Duran, whose hometown of Esperanza is 40 miles from Las Matas De Santa Cruz. "He's an idol for me and for many people down (in the Dominican Republic)."

Motivation for the future

The coronavirus pandemic hasn't slowed down Cruz's workouts or his work with the Boomstick23 Foundation and his other charitable interests. Throughout the pandemic, Cruz has joined other Dominican major leaguers to collect and deliver supplies to those in need. He is planning to use part of the \$100,000 grant from ESPN to build a computing center that will house his foundation's ongoing educational efforts. He also has a collaboration with Esperanza International, an organization founded by former MLB catcher Dave Valle aimed at alleviating poverty in the Dominican Republic and Haiti, to assist small businesses in the Las Matas De Santa Cruz area through small loans and other finance-

based initiatives.

"This time more than ever, people need other people," Cruz said.

Cruz works as hard as he does because he knows that the longer his career, the more opportunities he'll have to keep helping people. His is a voice that people listen to. Cruz's uncle is the mayor of Las Matas De Santa Cruz, and he's also friends with the DR's national police chief. This led to a meeting with Dominican President Danilo Medina in 2018, in which Cruz had the opportunity to advocate for the needs of his hometown, from a school bus to 24-hour electricity.

"Whatever I can do to help, I feel like it's my job to do it. I can reach a lot of doors and get to people, and they listen," Cruz said. "It makes me work harder because I know my community is getting better from the work that I'm putting in."

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