

# Albert Pujols' Field of Faith

✘ It's not quite March yet, but today is an unseasonably warm spring-like day. I'm a huge baseball fan, so that's got me thinking about the upcoming season.

I saw my first big league game in 1979 at the Astrodome where I became a life-long fan of the sport and devoted follower of the Houston Astros. Guys like Jose Cruz, Craig Reynolds, Nolan Ryan, Craig Biggio, Jeff Bagwell and current stars Lance Berkman and Roy Oswalt are just a few of my favorite players to don many variations of the Houston uniform.

If you know anything about baseball, you know that one of Houston's fiercest rivalries is the St. Louis Cardinals. My brother-in-law Denton is a big Cards fan so we have some interesting conversations like a few years back when I said, "You've got to admit, it would be cool to see Biggio and Bagwell get a World Series title before they retire," to which he replied in his classic deadpan voice, "No."

I used to be pretty serious about my sports devotion too, until I started working with ministries like Fellowship of Christian Athletes and began developing sports projects that helped pro and college athletes share their stories as a mode of evangelism and outreach. I still have my favorite teams, but now I find myself rooting for individual athletes just as much as anything.

One person in particular is Albert Pujols-the first baseman for the previously mentioned Cardinals. When he steps up to the plate against my 'Stros in a key at bat during a late season stretch, I cringe knowing that he can single-handedly kill my team's chances at the postseason with one swing. But I'm also conflicted because I know how amazing this guy is off the field and what kind of solid Christian example he's living for his teammates, his coaches and his fans to see.

Late in the 2008 season, I had the privilege of interviewing Pujols for an FCA series published by Regal Books. He was featured in the title *Excellence* that releases in early March. Pujols is originally from the Dominican Republic but is now a legalized American citizen. He is just as passionate about his relationship with Christ as he is passionate about helping his team succeed.

"I'm growing in the Word right now and God is showing me things," he told me. "If I hadn't accepted Christ when I first started playing baseball, I don't know where I would be right now."

Pujols' legendary work ethic combined with his jaw-dropping natural ability has provided a massive platform that only the world's most elite athletes usually enjoy. He's taken his success and used it to create the Albert Pujols Family Foundation that, among other things, assists the needs of impoverished families in his home country. Pujols is also very involved in reaching out to families with special needs children. This is a personal plight for him as the adopted father of a Down syndrome daughter (Isabella) whom was the child of his wife Diedre (who before their marriage was a single mother).

Pujols does his best to live by the words found in 1 Corinthians 15:58 in which the Apostle Paul says, "be steadfast, immovable, always excelling in the Lord's work, knowing that your labor in the Lord is not in vain." (HCSB)

That scripture is an appropriate analogy for Pujols who is steady as a rock along the right corner of the infield and an immovable force behind the plate. And while some think the imposing athlete is soft-spoken, they might be surprised to learn that he is very vocal about his faith in some unlikely places-most notably from his post at first base.

Back in 2006, his good friend (and author of *One Thing You*

Can't Do In Heaven) Mark Cahill challenged him to share his faith with teammates and opposing players. So Pujols took the suggestion and began doing something quite out of the ordinary. When a player would get a base hit, he would ask them "What do you think is going to happen to you when you die?" or "If you died today, where do you think you're going to go?"

"You'd be surprised how many people I witnessed to at first base," Pujols said. "Some of them were Christians and I encouraged them to do the same thing at their position or in the dugout with their teammates. There were some that would say their family was the most important thing in their life or money or baseball and I'd say, 'You're wrong.' Then I would grab one of Mark's books and send it to them and if I had the time before batting practice, I'd try to spend some time with them and try to witness to them."

Talk about putting yourself out there. Many athletes are afraid to let people know where they're coming from for fear of alienation or negative reaction. But an increasing number of these talented men and women are boldly standing up for Christ despite social pressure to do otherwise.

Pujols has openly embraced the philosophy presented in Hebrews 13:15-16 which says, "Therefore, through Him let us continually offer up to God a sacrifice of praise, that is, the fruit of our lips that confess His name. Don't neglect to do good and to share, for God is pleased with such sacrifices." (HCSB)

Most of those reading this are not in the position to witness to famous athletes, but we are all in a position to share the love of God with those around us. When I think about my fear of evangelism-whether it be lifestyle driven or from a traditional witnessing model-it's challenging to think about a guy like Pujols who has nothing to gain and everything to lose by sharing his faith so boldly with his peers.

So next time you feel like God is calling you to bravely “confess His name” in the workplace, in social settings or in the general public-and that feeling is accompanied by a host of butterflies in your stomach-think about Albert Pujols standing on first base in the middle of a Major League Baseball game sharing his faith with a bunch of tough, hard-nosed athletes who may or may not appreciate the approach.

Maybe this evangelism thing isn't so hard after all. I mean, if a baseball player can do it, what's my excuse?

*Chad Bonham is a freelance author, journalist and television and documentary producer from Broken Arrow, Okla.*