

# Baseball's Best Shows His Greatness Isn't Just on the Field

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It seems in this day and age, there are very few true sports heroes. Many professional athletes hate the term 'role model', and there are those that always seem to be in trouble; professionally and personally. It's enough to make the average fan always skeptical of a player's true intentions. So, when the media makes a sports figure out to be a truly nice guy, many people just sit back and wait for the crash that they believe will come.

One of the players that seems too good to be true is St. Louis Cardinals first baseman Albert Pujols.

For years, his on-field accomplishments have been lauded by everyone in the know, and he has the numbers to back it up. Just look up his career stats, they speak for themselves. He's a lock to enter the Hall of Fame.

Recently, more about his personal life has come to light. He has four children and he and his wife have established the Pujols Family Foundation which raises funds and awareness for people with Down's Syndrome, as their oldest daughter has the condition.

To say that Albert Pujols is a 'role model' seems an accurate description of the man.

Before I tell you about my encounter with Albert, and how it led to my most prized sports possession, you must know a little background about myself and my family.

My mother has been a St. Louis Cardinals fan since she was a child. Throughout her childhood, and mine, she was always listening to or watching a game.

Never a full season ticket holder, as it was just too expensive for our family of seven, my mom somehow still always managed to go to several games a year.

As an adult, I lucked into a season ticket share with some people that I worked with.

When I announced to my family that I was leaving St. Louis and moving to California, one of my mother's first inquiries was "Who's taking your Cardinals package"? Of course, she was. And it worked out well as she was retiring after thirty years as teacher/assistant principal, and since she was an empty-nester, she now had the time to go to as many games as her heart desired.

When I moved to California, I knew that it was unlikely that my mom would ever come to visit me during baseball season and I was right. Her yearly visits were usually in November; after the play-offs were complete.

For me, the move to California made it tough to follow my team as, at the time, internet feeds and satellite television were in their infancy. Fortunately, now there are many ways that a fan can watch an out-of-town team.

My devotion to the Cards showed in that I flew from Los Angeles to St. Louis every year for Opening Day. My plans for attending that hallowed game always began months in advance.

For the uninitiated, Opening Day in St. Louis is like a religious holiday.

One year, while my mother was visiting me, in November of course, I needed to run to the Nike store to pick up something. I asked if she wanted to go with me and she replied that since it was about an hour round trip, how about she stay home and make us a nice dinner instead? Never one to turn down some motherly cooking, I said it sounded like a swell idea.

While I was at the Nike store, one of the employees, who's a close friend of mine, called another employee in the upstairs area where I was standing and told that employee to tell me to come to the downstairs area immediately.

As I came down the stairs, I spotted The Man. Standing there by himself, casually looking at a shirt, in plain old street clothes, was Albert Pujols.

As I walked toward him, he spotted me advancing and got a look on his face that said, 'Please don't blow my cover.'

Since I live in Los Angeles, I see famous folks all the time, and usually I just ignore them and go about my business. But this was Albert Pujols, quite possibly the greatest baseball player of all time. Certainly the greatest baseball player of my generation.

I was eerily calm as I leaned in and said, "Hello. I'm a huge Cardinals fan. I fly in from my home here in Los Angeles to St. Louis for Opening Day every year."

With some skepticism in his voice, he replied, "Ok. When is Opening Day next year?"

Without a moment's hesitation, I stated, "March 31<sup>st</sup> at 3:05pm against the Milwaukee Brewers." A huge grin spread across his face as he placed a hand on my shoulder. "You are a huge fan," he practically exclaimed, "The schedule just came out! That was just announced!"

We conversed for a few more minutes and he was on his way. He was more than polite and shook my hand as he stepped away, thanking me for being a Cardinals fan.

On the drive home, I worked on just how to tell my mom about the encounter. While I knew that she would be thrilled that I got to meet Albert, she would be kicking herself that she didn't go with me to Nike that night.

And that's just how it went.

She was upset, but knew that luck and timing just weren't on her side that night.

After she'd returned to St. Louis, my friend from Nike called me. He said that Albert had left something for me at the store.

I went to pick up the mystery item and it was a signed ball. The second I held it I knew that it would be my Mother's Day gift that year. And it was. It now holds a place of honor among my mother's many, many baseball items.

But this story doesn't end there.

As Opening Day approached the following spring, my Nike friend called me again. He said that Albert wanted to make sure that 'the girl I met in the store' had tickets for the game. I told him to thank Albert and tell him that I was all set.

I mean, seriously, The Man didn't even know my name but went out of his way to make sure I had tickets.

A few months later, I got another call. The Cardinals were coming to LA to play the Dodgers. This time Albert had sent my friend some tickets specifically for me to see the Cardinals play in LA. He said that he really wanted me to be there.

I immediately called my mom and we quickly made her travel arrangements. This time she was going to come to visit me — during baseball season.

At the game, we sat with Albert's wife, Deidre and two of his kids, as well as other Cardinal family members. Deidre and the other families talked with my mom and I throughout the evening and when the game was over Deidre thanked us for coming and supporting Albert. She said that Albert was impressed that I didn't ask for tickets for Opening Day and that's why he wanted me to come to this game.

She said that she would have taken us down to say hello but it was a get-away day. My mom had already written a thank you note that she gave Deidre.

To say it was a magical day is an understatement. I got to spend some never-to-be-forgotten time with my mom doing something that made her incredibly happy.

So, my most treasured article of sports memorabilia is an autographed Albert Pujols baseball, and the memories that go with it, highlighted by meeting a person that I believe is a true sports hero.

While the ball is not physically in my personal possession, I know that it's in a very safe and secure place, among pictures, pennants, ticket stubs and scorecards at my mom's place. It rests near balls autographed by Ozzie Smith ball and Stan Musial, excellent company for it.

And while I have the chance, I want to say thank you again to Albert. Your kindness will always be remembered and celebrated as I can assure you that I will tell this story over and over again.

And with regards to that ball, my mother has assured me that one day, it will come back to me.

With the knowledge about what that really means, I hope that I can only visit that ball for many, many years to come.

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