

PRESENTED BY

PLAYER OF THE YEAR **Albert Pujols** ST. LOUIS CARDINALS

KNOW ALL  
**ALBERT PUJOLS**  
**2003**

**The first of his kind**

by Joe Strauss

The sound, explosive as a cannon shot and persistent as a monsoon, gives him away.

By now, teammates don't even have to be watching to know **Albert Pujols** has stepped into an indoor batting cage.

"It's embarrassing at first because the sound is totally different—it's so much louder. Then you realize that it's not you. It's him that's different," says Cardinals catcher Mike Matheny, who has watched and listened to his team's left fielder/first baseman/third baseman in each of **Pujols**' incredibly productive three major league seasons.

It is accurate to say there never has been a hitter like the 23-year-old **Pujols**, named by a panel of major league managers, executives and scouts as the SPORTING NEWS' Player of the Year for 2003. **Pujols** won the National League batting title this season at .359, while hitting 43 home runs and driving in 124 runs. He tied Hall of Famer Ralph Kiner for most

home runs (114) in the first three seasons of a career.

**Pujols** also became the first player in history to hit 30 home runs, bat .300 and both score and drive in 100 runs in each of his first three seasons. Before **Pujols**, no player had done that even in his first two seasons.

**Pujols** received four of six votes from the panel. Giants outfielder Barry Bonds received the other two.

"To win an award like this is especially meaningful because you're talking about so many great players," said **Pujols**, a top-four finisher in N.L. MVP balloting his first two seasons and a strong contender for this season's award. "When you think about Preston Wilson, Todd Helton, Barry Bonds, Gary Sheffield, it's a great honor to be recognized in this way."

**Pujols** led the league in runs (137), hits (212) and total bases (394), ranked second in slugging and was third in on-base percentage. He also had a 30-game hitting streak,

longest in the majors this season.

But **Pujols**' talent transcends numbers.

"Experience teaches you how to do things better," says Cardinals manager Tony La Russa. "If you watch **Albert** closely, you'll see him make a defensive play going after a ball in the outfield or turning a 3-6-1 double play at first. He made more heads-up baserunning plays this year. It's all about his attitude of playing a winning game. The hitting is obvious. But everything he did this year, he did better."

He hasn't had a weakness exposed in three seasons, and accomplished veterans marvel at his technique, approach and intelligence.

"You talk to him about hitting, and you can't believe

you're listening to a 23-year-old guy," Reds first baseman Sean Casey says. "He has such a good idea about it all—staying inside the ball, hitting in counts, covering the plate with two strikes,

his approach. It's amazing how much he already knows—how much that he has figured out. This is his third year. He's had so much success, you have to believe he understands hitting."

**Pujols** says even he doesn't know where he gained his power of observation. But he possesses amazing recognition for pitches and total recall of pitchers' tendencies.

"I've been blessed," **Pujols** says. "The main thing is I can read a pitcher. I can make adjustments. People wonder how I'm able to do that. I don't know."

Great hitters are single-minded; some would say selfish. **Pujols** pleads guilty to the first but insists personal numbers remain secondary to team success. In that way, the Cardinals' third-place finish was a significant blemish.

"I don't think I'm the best hitter. I know I'm a good hitter, but I don't think I'm the greatest hitter in the game right now," **Pujols** says. "There are a lot of guys who are great hitters. It's nice what the media says, but you can't think about that stuff. You have to stay humble and go play the game."

"I want to be the best one day, so I continue to work hard. But this guy Barry Bonds has put up monstrous numbers the last four, five, six years."

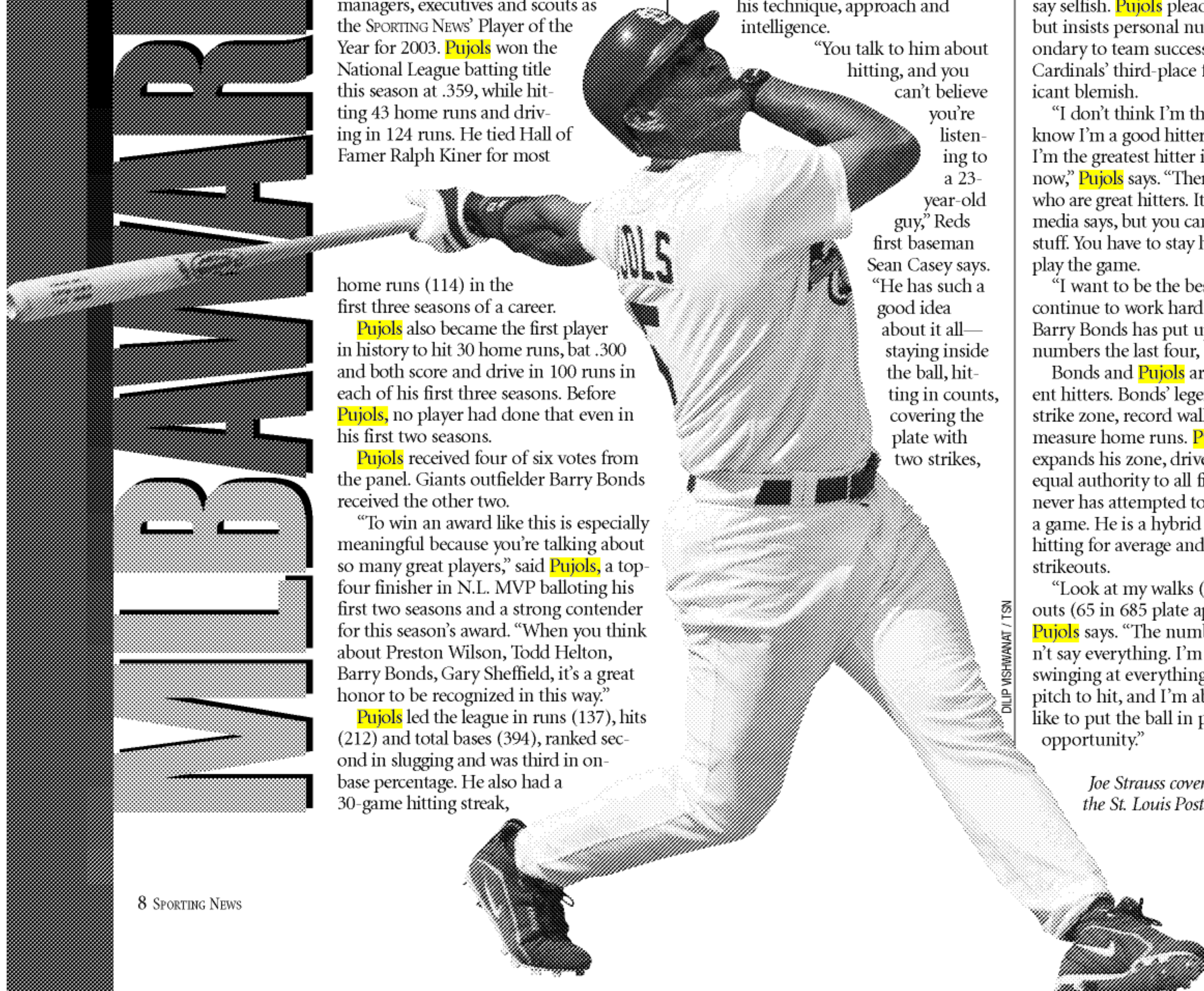
Bonds and **Pujols** are markedly different hitters. Bonds' legend includes a tight strike zone, record walk totals and tape-measure home runs. **Pujols** regularly expands his zone, drives the ball with equal authority to all fields and insists he never has attempted to hit a home run in a game. He is a hybrid hitter, capable of hitting for average and power with few strikeouts.

"Look at my walks (79) and my strikeouts (65 in 685 plate appearances)," **Pujols** says. "The number of walks doesn't say everything. I'm not up there swinging at everything. I get a good pitch to hit, and I'm able to drive it. I like to put the ball in play if I have an opportunity."

Joe Strauss covers the Cardinals for the St. Louis Post-Dispatch.

**Last 10 TSN Players of the Year**

1993	Frank Thomas
1994	Jeff Bagwell
1995	Albert Belle
1996	Alex Rodriguez
1997	Ken Griffey Jr.
1998	Sammy Sosa
1999	Rafael Palmeiro
2000	Carlos Delgado
2001	Barry Bonds
2002	Alex Rodriguez



DILIP VISHWANATH / TSN

## The defensive end

The Cardinals haven't settled on a long-term position for Albert Pujols. A shortstop with soft hands in high school, Pujols was named the Midwest League's best defensive third baseman in 2000. As a rookie in 2001, he played third and also manned the outfield for the first time. Now that Scott Rolen has taken over third and J.D. Drew is healthy in right, Pujols is playing left field against righthanders and often moves to first base against lefthanders, pushing Tino Martinez to the bench.

Pujols struggles tracking balls in left and lacks range. Still, he is at least average at three defensive positions, giving the team flexibility.

Pujols has played much of the season with a right elbow so damaged that a hard throw could cost him several months, if not the season. The elbow problem limits only his throwing and does not hinder his swing. The team is hopeful there won't be many game-turning plays that will require a throw from Pujols. In the meantime, center fielder Jim Edmonds shouts reminders at Pujols, telling him not to overthrow. —M.C.



**Albert Pujols is the best young hitter in baseball because he has great hands, prepares obsessively, produces consistently by making adjustments and has excellent vision.** He says his eyesight is 20/10. "They're as good as they can be," he says. That helps him pick up a pitcher's release point and the seams on the ball for pitch recognition.

**Albert Pujols is the best young hitter in baseball because he has great hands, prepares obsessively, produces consistently by making adjustments, has excellent vision and is mature beyond his years.** Pujols is not among those surprised by his incredible early success. He trusts his physical ability. Just as important, he never has been overwhelmed by all the attention and pressure during his rapid ascent.

That steadiness comes from his Christian faith, says Phillip Hunter, Pujols' pastor.

"Of course, there are great ballplayers without a faith in Christ," Hunter says. "Albert's faith, though, defines how he deals with success and failure and how he approaches the game." Pujols handles his success by giving credit to God and handles failure with determination to do better.

As a superstar in baseball mad St. Louis, Pujols, a born again Christian, knows his behavior comes under scrutiny. Already married with a son and a stepdaughter when he made his big league debut at 21, Pujols has no use for the off the field distractions that follow young athletes.

Baseball is important, but Pujols puts it third behind God and family, which is not to say he's not the hardest worker on the team. "I don't want to throw this opportunity away," he says. "I don't want to be lazy in this game; I don't want to be cocky; I don't want to think that I'm the best. I always want to be humble and be the same guy I was three or four years ago, when I signed, through the minor leagues and here in the big leagues."

**Albert Pujols is the best young hitter in baseball because he has great hands, prepares obsessively, produces consistently by making adjustments, has excellent vision, is mature and is never satisfied.** He put together the best first two seasons in the history of the game, and this year looks to be better than those two. Still, he never seems completely content with what he has accomplished.

Consider this story. In 2000, Pujols was tearing it up for the Cardinals' Class A club in Peoria, Ill. Page, then a roving hitting instructor, arrived in town to work on problems the hitters were having. On a board, Page wrote hitters' names with the times he wanted to meet with them. Pujols was hitting so well Page didn't schedule him, but Pujols insisted he needed help. "He wasn't happy hitting .330 or .340 in A ball, so I gave him all the work he wanted," Page says.

In the majors, that perfectionism has continued. "He can be 4 for 4, then make an out and be pissed at himself if he gave that at bat away," Page says. When first asked about being tough on himself, Pujols says he's not. Later, he says: "You don't do your job, of course, you're going to be disappointed; you're going to be mad. Everybody is."

He looks mad a lot of the time. Under a pulled down brim, his natural facial expression is a glare. He's big and muscular, he's always carrying a bat, and he's an intimidating presence. Imagine what it's like when he starts swinging. "He comes here to play every day," Page says. "He doesn't joke in B.P., he doesn't joke in the field. It's strictly business."

That's how Pujols is, those who know him say. When he's working, he's serious. And when baseball is involved, he's always working.

"I've known him to go out and hit in three different places in the same day," Karaff says. "Every time you would try to get a hold of him, (his wife) DeeDee would say he's out hitting somewhere. He was going to succeed because that's him. That's his work ethic—his determination to play." **TSN**

E-mail associate editor Matt Crossman at [mcrossman@sportingnews.com](mailto:mcrossman@sportingnews.com).

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SPORTS

# Around the NL

## TSN Numbers



Tapani

- 0.96** Kevin Tapani's ERA before his April 24 game in Colorado. It was 4.91 after the game.
- 4** Batters hit by Pedro Astacio on April 22, tying a major league record. He got the 2-1 win.
- 5-5** St. Louis pinch hitters' performance in a 15-inning loss to Montreal.
- 6** Combined games under .500 the Braves and Mets were entering the week.
- 10** Years between starts at shortstop for Matt Williams of the Diamondbacks. He started there April 24.

ALBERT DICKSON / TSN

## Coming attractions

Since when is a Cubs-Brewers matchup in early May interesting? Since the Cubs started 12-8 and the Brewers opened 10-10. Why are the Cubbies so tough? Their worst starting pitcher's ERA is 4.91. Milwaukee, meanwhile, has more punch than a *Rocky* movie. The four-game Battle of Cities Near Lake Michigan starts Monday at Wrigley Field. Keep an eye on Chicago's **Jeff Fassero**. The Cubs closer can do no wrong. ... Maybe Houston will be the cure for what ails Phillies 3B **Scott Rolen**. He is a lifetime .284 hitter, but he is batting barely above .200 this season. The Astros—against whom Rolen averages .303 for his career—host Philadelphia for a three-game set starting Monday.



ROBERT SEALE / TSN

## Prospect watch

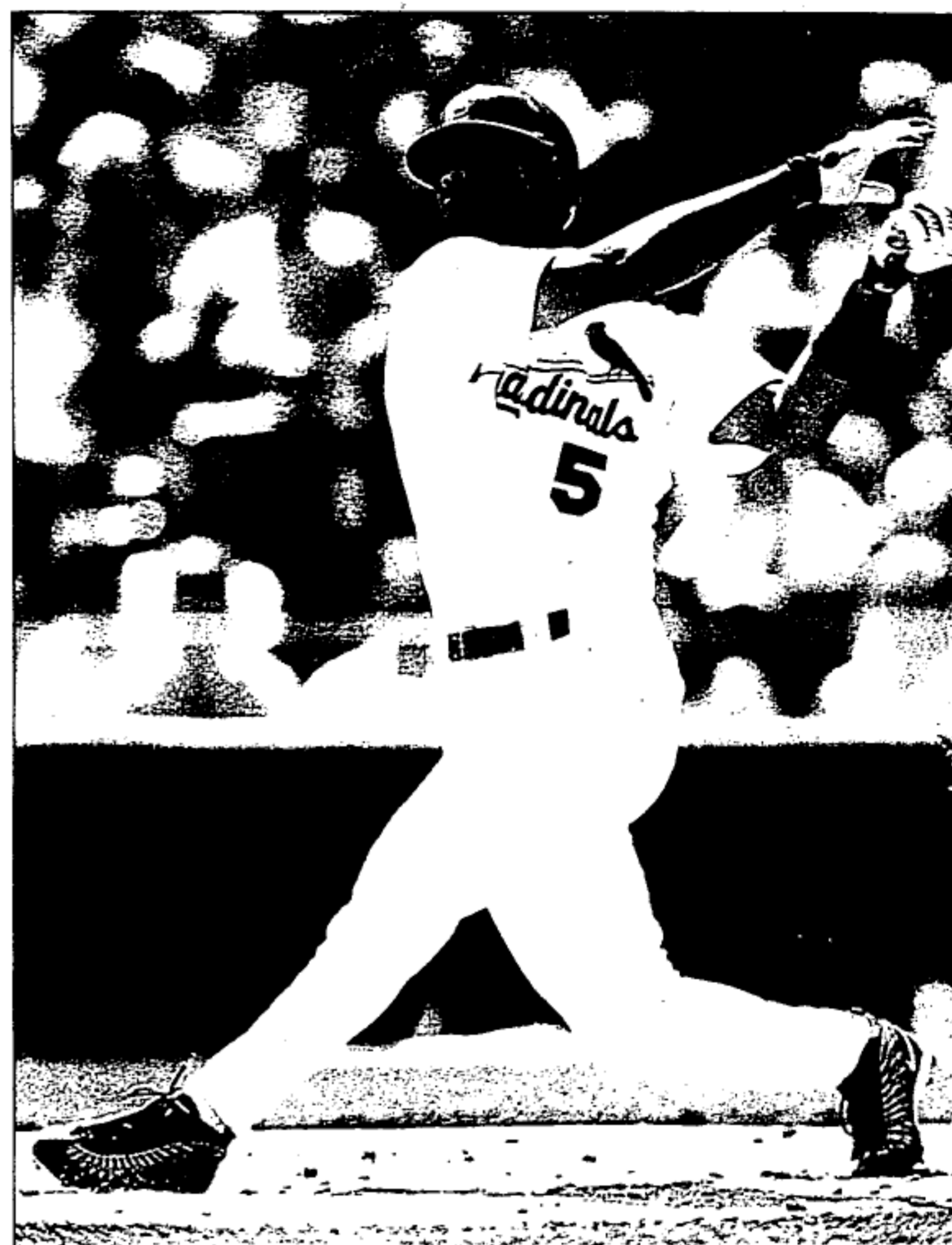
### Adam Dunn, OF, Reds

Dunn, who was a reserve quarterback at the University of Texas before being drafted in the second round by the Reds in 1998, quickly is developing into one of Cincinnati's top prospects. He is at Class AA Chattanooga, where he is hitting .333. At the end of last week, he was leading the Southern League in homers (five), RBIs (16), on-base percentage (.452) and slugging percentage (.623). Dunn, 21, has an exciting package of power and speed. Last season at Class A Daytona, he hit 16 homers and was 24-for-29 on steal attempts. He had 101 strikeouts but also coaxed 100 walks and led the Midwest League in on-base percentage (.428).

## Doghouse

Recently the Reds' **Dmitri Young** challenged some heckling fans to meet him after the game and, uh, work out their differences. According to the Associated Press, Young "waited outside the Reds' clubhouse for the fans, who never showed up." No kidding. Young is 6-2, 235 and is paid \$3.5 million a year to, among other things, turn on **Randy Johnson** fastballs. No report on any of the fans' vocations, but how much you wanna bet the fastest thing they have to turn on is a TV set on wheels? "They were just trying to be comedians," Young complained, "and we're trying to be professional." One would hope. Here's a tip, Dmitri: The next time someone offers you seven figures to do something you once did for free, there's a catch. In this case, it's that not everybody who shows up at your place of employment has as much accountability as you.

## The Book on: Albert Pujols



ALBERT DICKSON / TSN

It took the Cardinals' rookie third baseman/outfielder/first baseman all of a few innings to become a fan favorite in St. Louis.

On opening day, **Pujols** made a sensational running, barehanded grab-and-throw on a swinging bunt. Later, he became the first Cardinals rookie to hit a home run in the home opener in 47 years.

Entering the week, Pujols' stat line had more superlatives than a high school yearbook: most home runs ever by a rookie in April (tied with eight); most homers, RBIs (26), extra-base hits (16) and total bases (64) among major league rookies; most hits (33) in the National League.

**Pujols** is not just bashing balls all over the place, though. He has been fielding them all over the place, too. Although he had four errors last week, he has started at first, third, right and left. **Pujols** play is a big reason the Cards, expected to be a favorite in the N.L., were at least hovering around .500. Meanwhile, the other unexpected element in the team's season has displayed a mature demeanor and confidence and hasn't seemed the least bit surprised by his quick rise.

**Pujols**, 21, spent most of last season—his first in professional baseball—at Class A Peoria and was named the Cardinals' minor league player of the year. In spring training this year, he hit .349 with just eight strikeouts in 62 at-bats, winning a spot on the roster, but that doesn't explain why he hasn't been intimidated by big-league pitching.

"He stands there like a man," Expos manager Felipe Alou said after **Pujols** tore through Montreal pitching. "They didn't teach him fear at home, where he grew up. It's not part of his bag."

**Pujols** moved from the Dominican Republic to the Kansas City area when he was 16.

Hitting coach Mike Easler says **Pujols** is blessed with natural talent but that he also is learning how to adjust to pitchers. Solid mechanics enable **Pujols** to hit pitches of all speeds all over the plate.

"He stays quiet, the less movement the better," Easler says. "He's got a good solid base, knees flexed, slightly in. He's pre-loaded, meaning his hands are back. And he's got vision; the eyes are focused on the release point. He's almost a no-strider. That quiets his head down, so he sees the ball better. And once he sees it—ppssshewww!" —Matt Crossman

For more info on your favorite team in the National League, log on to [www.sportingnews.com/baseball](http://www.sportingnews.com/baseball) AOL keyword: TSN