

Good Habits (Excellence - Chapter 4)

n/a

Ready:

"Therefore, my dear brothers, be steadfast, immovable, always excelling in the Lord's work, knowing that your labor in the Lord is not in vain." —1 Corinthians 15:58

"We are what we repeatedly do. Excellence, then, is not an act, but a habit." —Aristotle

Set

Numbers. In sports, they often mean everything. Even the seemingly most inconsequential numbers can spell the difference between winning and losing — the difference between a gold medal and a silver medal, the difference between a championship and second place, the difference between greatness and mediocrity.

Numbers are especially important to professional athletes because things such as a league-leading scoring average or a consistent number of home runs can result in high-dollar contracts and job security.

But strangely, Albert Pujols (whose career numbers are eye-popping even to the average sports fan) could care less about his batting average, his RBI totals or his on-base percentage. "My goals every day are to help my team win and hopefully have the opportunity to go to the playoffs or the World Series," Pujols says. "That's my goal every year — to win the World Series. Through Christ, I get to please people through that because that's what we play for. God has blessed me to win a World Series in such a young career. After just seven years in the big leagues, playing in two World Series and six playoffs is just unbelievable. It's more than I could ask for. I really make sure I keep my eyes on Christ first. If I do that, I think everything else will be easy."

But for Pujols, growing up in a poor family in the Dominican Republic was anything but easy. He did what he could to help by taking odd jobs here and there, but Pujols mostly tried his best to work hard in school and stay out of trouble by playing baseball every afternoon in the streets. His family moved to the United States in the early 1990s and eventually settled in the Kansas City area. Pujols excelled in baseball at Fort Osage High School in Independence, Missouri, where he was a two-time All-State selection. He then played college ball at Maple Woods Community College where one season was enough to attract the attention of some Major League clubs.

Pujols was drafted by the St. Louis Cardinals in the thirteenth round of the 1999 draft, but he turned down a meager signing bonus and played that season in the Jayhawk League in Kansas. A year later, he was in the Cardinals' fold and headed to the minor leagues, where he

spent most of the 2000 season playing for the team's single-A club in Peoria. When Pujols started spring training in 2001, the Cardinals began to look for a way to include him on their 25-man roster. Once he took to the field that season, it became evident to all that Pujols would be a force to contend with for years to come.

But his Major League debut on April 2, 2001, is not even close to being the most important day in Pujols's life. That day had arrived three years earlier when he met his future wife, Deidre, a born-again Christian who invited him to church. Before that, Pujols had limited knowledge of the Bible and knew little more than the fact that "there was a guy who died for us."

He began attending a Bible study with Deidre at Kansas City Baptist Temple. As God softened his heart, Pujols's desire for a relationship with the Creator slowly grew until he could no longer resist. "There were times when I really wanted [to commit my life to Christ], but I never got a person to push me like my wife [did]," Pujols says. "It's like a lot of people believe it, but they don't want to get saved — they don't think they're ready. I think that day I was ready. I told my wife that when I walked into church that day, I was going to get saved."

Early on, Pujols called on Christian teammates such as Andy Benes, Mike Matheny and J.D. Drew for accountability and spiritual mentoring. Now, years later, Pujols is the one taking the role he once relied upon so heavily. "I'm growing in the Word right now, and God is showing me things," Pujols says. "If I hadn't accepted Christ when I first starting playing baseball, I don't know where I would be right now. It wasn't like I was a bad little boy. I never drank. I never smoked. I don't party. I don't do all of those things that people think you have to do to have fun in this life. There are other things that you can do to have fun in this world. People think that they need to go out and have a glass of wine or drink and all of that, but to me it's not important. I can have fun just going to the park and spending time with my family. I get to come home after a tough night at a stadium and see my kids laughing and spend time with them. That's more important to me."

Pujols's relationship with Christ has not only made him a better husband and father, but it has also helped strengthen him in his lifelong pursuit of excellence, a concept that he defines as "just doing the best that I can with what I do and then honoring God."

He was first inspired to strive for excellence when he was still in the Dominican Republic, initially by his large family and then later by the many professional baseball players who have emerged from his home country. Here in the United States, Pujols credits his wife, Diedre, for teaching him even more about excellence — specifically, excellence as it relates to the Word of God.

Rick Horton has had a front-row seat to Pujols's career since he burst onto the scene in 2001. Horton, a former St. Louis pitcher, is a member of the Cardinals' broadcast team and also serves as the area director for Fellowship of Christian Athletes. He describes Pujols as "a miraculous athlete" with "incredible drive and determination." And he believes that Pujols's good habits — preparation, focus and discipline — separate him from the rest of the players.

"His preparation is beyond what most Major League Baseball players do," Horton says. "He really studies the film, and he's good at it. He studies the film of his opponents. He knows and understands the swing and breaks down the swing. He also hits more baseballs off the tee when nobody is looking than most players do. He really works at his craft. He's got a great work ethic. In all of the hoopla that's surrounded him over the years, he doesn't back down on

his work. He just works harder. Every year going into spring training, he always says he's just trying to make the team; and everybody laughs when he says it because he's one of the best hitters on the planet, but at some deep level, he really means that."

Pujols literally takes nothing for granted. It doesn't matter to him that he won the 2001 National League (NL) Rookie of the Year award. It doesn't matter to him that he was named NL Most Valuable Player in both 2005 and 2008. It doesn't matter to him that he has the highest career batting average among active players. It doesn't matter to him that he's made multiple appearances in the All-Star Game (missing only the 2002 contest). It doesn't matter to him how many awards and big numbers he puts up. Pujols still approaches each season the same.

"Without preparation, you won't have excellence," Pujols says. "So I really try to prepare myself in the offseason for three months. I work hard in the gym and try to keep myself healthy. After you've laid the bat and glove down for three months, you can't just show up to spring training and expect to have excellence. It's impossible."

Horton believes that Pujols's consistent training is even more amazing considering the year-round demands on his time. "He's always at the park early," he says. "He's always doing something valuable. You never see him wasting time. He's also pretty focused. When he gets to the park, he goes about his business. Now he's got more business than everybody else does. A lot of players can't handle being the superstar. You're the team spokesman. Everybody wants to interview you. Players from the other team send you over a box of things to sign. It really does happen. I saw [Mark] McGwire go through that. It's unbelievable. But Pujols is impervious to distraction."

Pujols admits that it is very tough to stay focused. "There are a lot of distractions out there in this world right now," Pujols says. "There's women, drugs — everything. If you open the newspaper right now, you can see that every day there's something happening in this world. It's tough. I make sure that all of that doesn't get into my mind. I'm here to try to serve God and to try to honor Him and not get caught up in those distractions. Am I perfect? No. Nobody is perfect. Jesus Christ was the only One that was perfect. I just try to stay focused and make sure that whatever I do is to honor God. So those distractions are easy for me to avoid."

Preparation and focus, however, mean nothing without rock-solid discipline that is fortified by the will to succeed and to be excellent. Horton says that Pujols has stayed disciplined by establishing boundaries even when they can sometimes bring criticisms from those who don't understand (or respect) his need to stay true to specific training routines that provide mental, physical and spiritual balance.

"Albert's got pretty thick skin," Horton says. "He's totally immune to that. He knows who he is. He's comfortable with who he is. He's comfortable in his relationship with Christ, and he's doing what he can to grow personally and to lead others. He has had numerous occasions where he's presented his faith to his teammates and he knows he's accountable for that, but he's not trying to please men. I think that's helped him say no when he needed to say no and say yes when he needed to say yes."

As Pujols's spiritual life has grown exponentially, so has his understanding of the purpose for excellence on the baseball field, which also blends into his personal life, where his ability to impact others is just as significant.

“Now I live for Christ where before I was thinking about myself,” Pujols says. “I’ve been saved since 1999, and I’ve seen how Christ has changed my life — how God has worked in my life and in my family. I see changed lives through [our Pujols Family Foundation] every day because God has given me the opportunity when before it was all about Albert Pujols. Now, through Christ, He has shown me that it’s not about Albert Pujols. It’s about Him. It’s about helping others. I just thank God for allowing me to call on Him and for being my Father and for sending Jesus to die on the cross for my sins and for giving me the opportunity to leave that selfishness I had in the past and to live for Him right now.”

Furthermore, Pujols contends that because of his daily commitment to excellence, he now has the opportunity to share the message of salvation through Christ with others — teammates, team administrators and fans — who otherwise would not be as receptive to him.

“You have to set an example of excellence,” Pujols says. “If you were the average guy and you go out there and don’t take care of your business and you don’t do the things you’re supposed to do and you don’t lead by example — which is what God wants us to do — you’re not going to have the opportunity to witness. If they see me doing crazy things, they’re going to say, ‘What are you talking about? You’re just doing the same things that I’m doing.’ But I have to set an example in the clubhouse. I’m not perfect. The only One who was perfect was Christ. We want to be perfect. We want to be like Him, but that’s impossible because if we were perfect, we wouldn’t be here right now.”

Pujols has used his platform as a star player to influence his teammates and share the hope of eternal life with them. “I have a really good relationship with Yadier [Molina],” he says. “I thank God that He gave me the opportunity about three years ago to witness to him, and he gave his life for Christ. To me, that’s bigger than hitting a home run in game seven of the World Series with two outs in the bottom of the ninth. That was the best thing that happened to me that year — knowing that I witnessed to one of my teammates, a guy who I really admire and a guy who I really tried to help.”

Pujols also displays his commitment to excellence off the field through the Pujols Family Foundation, which he runs with his wife. They work to support families touched by Down syndrome, in part due to the fact that his adopted daughter, Isabella (born to Deidre prior to their marriage in 2000), was born with the condition. Through the foundation, the Pujols family also actively supports many programs aimed at improving the education, economic situation and physical environment of impoverished children and their families in the Dominican Republic. He and his wife also make an annual medical missions trip to his native country during the off-season.

“Knowing the Word of God and going back to the Dominican Republic, I’m able to teach people about what God has done in my life, and I’m able to set an example and show them who I live for,” Pujols says. “Christ is using me through the foundation, so I can witness to people who don’t know the Word. They listen because I’m Albert Pujols the baseball player. Well, it’s not about Albert Pujols. It’s about Christ. Every day I thank God for that. He could have picked anyone, but I’m grateful and thankful that He’s using me to reach these poor kids in the Dominican Republic who don’t have anything.”

“[Pujols] talks a lot about his responsibility to do his best with the gifts God has given him,” Horton adds. “He says that publicly all the time. I think he’s got a really good understanding of stewardship. We always think about that as a financial thing, but it’s primarily a giftedness

issue. He uses his gifts and his finances. I think that's part of his spiritual growth that keeps him connected. He's also growing in his leadership. It's pretty evident in the Cardinal clubhouse."

That's just another reason why Pujols believes excellence has little to do with numbers and everything to do with giving all you have to the glory of God. His philosophy can be traced back to 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."*

"I haven't done anything to deserve what God has given me," Pujols says. "I really enjoy my relationship with Him and I enjoy my family and I enjoy this game. I'm having fun with this game. This is a platform that He has given me, so I can glorify Him and I can witness to other people. I make sure that I do my 110 percent and do my best to honor Him."

Go

1. Numbers have an important place in athletics and other areas of life. What are some ways that numbers impact the difference between success and failure in your life? How closely do you keep up with your numbers? Does the way you approach statistical information help or hinder your performance?

2. For Pujols, the pursuit of excellence starts with preparation. What are some ways that you prepare for competition? Read Ephesians 6:10-18. How is a soldier's preparation similar to that of a competitor? What are some consequences of being unprepared?

3. Read 1 Corinthians 15:58. What are some distractions you deal with on a daily basis? How does Paul encourage us to avoid such distractions? What do you think "your labor in the Lord is not in vain" means?

4. Read Proverbs 21:31. What motivates you to have good habits as an athlete? In other areas of your life? How disappointed are you when you don't win or don't achieve your goals? How does the passage in Proverbs keep performance results in perspective?

5. Read Hebrews 13:15-16. In what ways are good habits "a sacrifice of praise" (v. 15)? How does placing God at the top of your priority list keep you focused on striving for excellence?

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