

Pujols Gamers: A Primer

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INTRODUCTION:

It's no secret that Albert Pujols is considered by many to be the best young player in the game today. To collectors of current game used equipment, no player's memorabilia is more coveted. Genuine Albert Pujols game used equipment is among the most difficult to obtain in the hobby. Because Pujols has never signed an exclusive deal for the sale of his memorabilia, authentic examples of his jerseys, bats, gloves, and other equipment are quite scarce. The purpose of this article is to provide collectors with an overview of what Albert has or has not used during his Major League career and to protect collectors from the incredible amount of fraudulent memorabilia being offered on eBay and elsewhere.

GAME WORN JERSEYS:

2001: Cardinals jerseys were manufactured by Rawlings. Jerseys were tagged on the inside of the tail with a Rawlings tag, a size flag tag, and a year/set flag tag. No special patches were worn on these jerseys, until after 9/11 when the American flag patch was added to the back of the neck. Pujols wore a size 46 for a short time in April of 2001, and then switched to a size 48. Beware of properly tagged 2001's with loose embroidery on the front "birds and bat" logo. For a photo reference of what the stitching on the front of Cardinals jerseys SHOULD look like, please refer to *The Sporting News'* recent hardcover book entitled *Cardinal Nation*.

2002: Cardinals jerseys were manufactured by Rawlings (for the last time). Jerseys were tagged on the inside of the tail with a Rawlings tag, a size flag tag, and a year/set flag tag. The year/set flag tag on 2002 jerseys are made of a paper fiber material instead of the nylon material used in 2001. From April through late June no special patches were worn on the jerseys. After the death of Darryl Kile and Jack Buck, special patches were added to each sleeve. Pujols wore a size 48 for the entire 2002 season. Beware of properly tagged 2002's with retail Buck & Kile patches and/or incorrect size numbers on the back and front. Please note that the Cardinals did wear only the Buck memorial patch for a very short period of time in 2002, although no examples with just one patch have ever surfaced in the hobby.

2003: Cardinals jerseys were manufactured by Majestic for the first time ever. Jerseys were tagged on the outside of the tail with a Majestic tag and a size flag tag. A very limited number of jerseys have surfaced with a year flag tag, but these are extremely rare. No special patches were worn on 2003 Cardinals jerseys. Pujols wore a size 48 for the entire 2003 season. Pay special attention to the interior wash tag on 2003 Pujols jerseys, which should carry a "0062" code (retail jerseys, which are rarely used in emergency circumstances by the Cardinals, are coded "6200"). Also note that jerseys worn during Spring Training of 2003 have two buttons very close to one another above the Cardinals logo (this "high button" style was canned prior to the start of the 2003 regular season).

2004: Cardinals jerseys were manufactured by Majestic. Jerseys were tagged on the outside of the tail with a Majestic tag and a size flag tag. A very limited number of jerseys have surfaced with a year flag tag, but these are extremely scarce. No special patches were worn on 2004 Cardinals jerseys. Pujols wore a size 48 for most of the 2004 season, switching to a size

50 late in the year (and throughout the postseason). Pay special attention to the interior wash tag on 2004 Pujols jerseys, which should carry a "0062" code (retail jerseys, which are rarely used in emergency circumstances by the Cardinals, are coded "6200").

2005: Like all MLB teams, Cardinals jerseys were manufactured by Majestic. Several 2005 Cardinals jerseys have surfaced with a year flag tag, but many also did not have year tagging. The Cardinals wore a special Busch Memorial Stadium Final Season patch on the sleeve of both home and road jerseys. Albert wore only size 50 jerseys in 2005, all of which reportedly have the pro-coded "0062" interior wash tag. The material on 2005 game used jerseys is unmistakably pro quality – very soft and heavyweight compared to their retail counterparts. It has also been reported that most of Albert's 2005 jerseys have custom straight hemmed tails, while others have the more traditional rounded tails. The jersey worn by Pujols during the last regular season home game at old Busch Stadium, the jersey worn when the "Minute Maid Miracle" homerun was hit off Brad Lidge in Houston, and a home jersey donated by Albert to the Joe DiMaggio Children's Hospital in Florida all had custom straight hemmed tails.

2006: Cardinals jerseys were again manufactured by Majestic. Some jerseys had a year flag tag, some did not. The Cardinals wore a special Busch Stadium Inaugural Season patch on the sleeve of their home jerseys. Albert wore only size 50 jerseys in 2006, all of which reportedly have the pro-coded "0062" interior wash tag. It has also been reported that all of Albert's 2006 jerseys have custom straight hemmed tails. Because regular season jerseys were carried over to the World Series in 2006 (patches were added), it has been reported that all of Albert's 2006 jerseys were kept by him. To date, no 2006 jerseys with team or player provenance have surfaced in the hobby.

GAME USED BATS:

It seems most Pujols bats available in the collectibles market have some characteristic that isn't consistent with use by Albert. So, to help Pujols collectors make more-informed buying decisions, I've put together a quick reference guide that offers tips and opinions that, I hope, will at least cause potential buyers to think twice before spending big bucks on a Pujols bat.

It's no secret that Albert swaps bats with other players. In the past, bats used by Albert with other players' names on the barrel were common at the Busch Stadium Team Store. The most recent example is an Aramis Ramirez model Max Bat used by Pujols in 2006. Accounts of other players using Pujols models also are common, especially current and former teammates like Hector Luna and Edgar Renteria. Just because Albert's name is on the barrel is no guarantee that he used it.

So, what should collectors look for in a Pujols bat? Obviously, any bat should have proper markings. On a Louisville Slugger, for example, if the 125 is underlined or there's no model number after "Genuine," it's a promotional bat, not a gamer. A few bats without model numbers have surfaced, originating from credible sources and exhibiting Albert's characteristics. It's possible these promo bats were used in games, but knowing how choosy Albert is about the wood he wields (he "thumps" the bat next to his ear to judge the quality of the wood and rejects those that don't pass the sound test), you have to wonder whether these inferior-wood bats were used by Albert in actual major league games.

Source: Your safest bet is to buy a Pujols bat directly from the Cardinals. They sometimes are available at stadium auctions or online auctions benefiting the Cardinals Care charity. A word of caution, though - the Cardinals aren't always as diligent as you'd hope when it comes to

gamers. In past years, I've seen off-brand Pujols bats auctioned that I really question. The team is better about it now, but I'd bet some older LOAs have been attached to batting practice bats and Pujols bats used by other players.

If you can't buy directly from the Cardinals, buy from someone who has. Ask the seller for a Cardinals LOA; if they purchased a bat from the team, they should have no problem producing an accompanying letter. Pujols does sell some game-used equipment direct to the public through his Pujols Family Foundation (PFF) Web site. Unfortunately, game-used bats have been rare.

If you can't buy a Pujols bat from the Cardinals or PFF and need to rely on dealers or eBay sellers, there are several more things to consider.

Manufacturer: Albert uses many different brands of bats. During the past couple of seasons, he's shown a preference for Sam Bat. However, he's also used Louisville Slugger, X-Bat, Old Hickory and others. During his first two seasons, Albert did use Rawlings bats; but during the past two seasons, he's used Rawlings in just two games (both in 2005). When asked by collectors, Albert says he has never used a Mizuno during a regular-season game and there is no photo evidence to dispute that claim.

My recommendation regarding Pujols bats is to purchase either a Louisville Slugger or Sam Bat. That doesn't mean other bats are automatically bad, but the numbers don't lie. The odds of a Rawlings or Easton bat being an actual gamer are slim. Be especially wary of X-Bats made prior to 2006 because the general public could purchase bats identical to those used by players. These retail bats had the flag of the Dominican Republic on the handle (pro bats did not have the flag). When you see these for sale as "gamers," the flag usually remains. If there is no flag, look for a rectangular void in the bat finish indicating where a flag may have been removed.

Model: Albert favors the Louisville Slugger I13L, but also has received and used the I13, C243, M356 and R205. His Sam Bats are either SG1, JB1 or JB1(S)SG1 models. X-Bats will be labeled "Model 24/Pro Maple 34" or "Model 13/Pro Maple 34" and should not have any kind of flag on the handle. Old Hickory bats are labeled "Custom Pro AP5" or "34.0 PRO JL18."

If you're considering a Louisville Slugger, make sure the bat conforms to Albert's specs. Most of his bats are 34" long, but there are some that measure 34.5". Weights run from 31 ounces to 32.5 ounces, though he did receive a dozen bats in 2005 that were 36 ounces (perhaps he wanted a heavier bat for batting practice). Remember, a bat could look legit, but if it's too heavy, it probably was made for promotional purposes.

Pine tar: I've seen a few Pujols bats that were just caked in pine tar. That's not consistent with what I've witnessed during Albert's career. I've gone back through photos since 2001 and can't find him using a bat with heavy tar. Typically, his bats show darkened wood from the label toward the knob about 12 inches; the area where he grips the bat is typically lighter, almost clean.

Use: It seems Albert doesn't use bats very long. It's unusual to see one of his bats look really hammered. Albert bats with the label up, so ball marks should appear above the barrel stampings on the "right hand hitter's side." Visible ink transfers should be blue on all Pujols bats (except World Series-used bats; those should show gold ink). Because Albert hits the ball so hard, you also should see seam impressions in the wood.

Knob: The one place where Albert's bats lack consistency is in the way the knobs are marked. Sometimes the "5" will be large, sometimes it'll be small. Sometimes the length and weight will be noted, sometimes it won't. In the past, Albert would write "Game" on his favorite bats, but he wasn't even consistent in how he did that. Some batting practice bats will have "BP" on the knob. In 2005, Albert sometimes used numbering labels provided by Schutt Sports. In spite of all that, if you've seen enough Pujols bats, you usually can recognize legitimately marked bats and spot the suspicious ones.

Other characteristics: Because the bat box in the Cardinals dugout at Busch II was painted red, a typical Pujols bat prior to 2006 (in fact, any Cardinals player's bat) will have red marks around the barrel end. Sure, some bats may never have been stored in the home dugout; they could have been used and broken on the road before ever seeing use at Busch. But, red paint around the end certainly is something to look for on a bat used from 2001-2005. You might also notice an indentation or ring around the bat about 10 inches up from the barrel end. That would be from the on-deck weight Pujols swings before each at-bat.

Autographs: Although he did sign bats early in his career, Albert rarely signs bats anymore -- not even for Cardinals Care. If you see a recent bat with Albert's signature, make sure it comes from an impeccable source, like LaRussa's ARF.

Final thoughts: An Albert Pujols game-used bat is a huge investment for most collectors. Before you spend a substantial amount of cash on one, make sure you've done your homework and know what you're buying. Just because a bat comes with a letter of authenticity -- even from respected sources like PSA/DNA or MEARS -- don't go into a purchase blindly. Trust me, the authenticators who sign those letters are nice guys who know their stuff -- but they are not watching every at bat, talking with people inside the Cardinals organization or examining virtually every Pujols bat that is offered at auction by the Cardinals. Their letters will tell you a bat is a Pujols model consistent with factory records, and that it is used -- but they're usually careful not to say that Pujols used the bat.

Frankly, unless he walked from home plate to the stands and handed me the bat personally, I couldn't tell you whether Pujols used a specific bat, either. But, because I do watch every at bat and have examined many actual Pujols bats offered by the Cardinals, I have a much more informed idea of what to look for in a Pujols gamer. Now that you've read this, I hope you do, too.

GAME USED GLOVES:

2001: Pujols split his time almost evenly between 3B, 1B, and OF during his rookie campaign. As a result, a few different glove types exist. Pujols used only black Nike gloves in 2001, with his name embroidered in yellow on the thumb of each glove. Beware of Nike gloves that show excessive use and have strange initials hand-written on the inside or outside of the glove. It is known that Pujols gifted many unused Nike gloves to relatives and/or friends in the Dominican Republic, who used the gloves and later sold them in the United States as Albert's gamers. Albert did not use any Rawlings gloves in 2001, 2002, or 2003.

2002: Pujols played primarily OF in 2002, but also spent some time at 3B and 1B (and even a few innings at SS!). As a result, a few different glove types exist. Pujols used both black and dark tan Nike gloves in 2001, with his name embroidered in yellow on the thumb of each glove. Beware of Nike gloves that show excessive use and have strange initials hand-written on the inside or outside of the glove. It is known that Pujols gifted many unused Nike gloves to

relatives and/or friends in the Dominican Republic, who used the gloves and later sold them in the United States as Albert's gamers.

2003: Pujols did not play 3B in 2003, but spent time in both the OF and at 1B. Pujols used only Nike gloves in 2003, but there were subtle changes this season. All black and black and red (two-toned) gloves were used in 2003, with RED embroidery on the thumb of each glove. Beware of Nike gloves that show excessive use and have strange initials hand-written on the inside or outside of the glove – and also be aware of 2003 gloves that are not broken in or show artificial game use.

2004 and 2005: When Albert made the switch to playing full-time 1B, he also switched to Rawlings gloves. Pujols' 1B gloves are embroidered with his children's names on the thumb in red. The first glove Rawlings made for Pujols was light tan with red lacing, but later models were black and red or dark brown. To date, only two game worn Rawlings first baseman's gloves have surfaced in the hobby – one light tan with red lacing (used in Spring Training), and another black and red glove that was sold at the PFF's 2005 Christmas Gala (used throughout 2005 and during the final game at old Busch Stadium). One other "game issued" unused glove was sold by Steiner Sports in an online auction.

2006: For the third consecutive season, Pujols used only a Rawlings glove. In 2005, Albert used both a tan and a black and red glove. In 2006, he used only a black and red glove. The main glove used by Pujols during the 2006 season was kept by him. No back-up models have surfaced to date. On a related note, 2006 marked the first time Pujols won a Gold Glove Award.

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