The Return
By: Austin Rader

I had never been so star struck.

It was the summer of 2003. I was five years old and my hair was short. I was on vacation in St. Louis when my dad called my mom during a morning work-out. "Hurry up and bring Austin up to the gym," he said "Get here as quick as you can!" We were staying at my grandparents' house and luckily they were a five minute trip from the gym.

When my Mom and I arrived, I walked straight to the indoor track. My Dad put me on his shoulders as the best player in Major League Baseball was running towards us. That person was Albert Pujols.

It's a kid's dream to meet your idol. I was fortunate enough to meet and work out with mine. Growing up, I was all about Albert Pujols and would watch every game he played on the big screen in Atlanta. He was a hero in St. Louis and when my family decided to move to St. Louis, I was fortunate enough to see him play countless of times.

Consider some of his amazing successes. In addition to achieving 3,000 hits, 2,000 RBIs, and maintaining a career .300 batting average, he has had dozens of 'highlights' throughout his career.

The "comeback game against the Chicago Cubs in 2004 was one that quickly comes to mind. The Cardinals were down 7-1, when Pujols hit three home runs en route to an 11-8 win that effectively ended the NL Central Race in late July. Another big highlight came with his opposite field home-run off Justin Verlander in the third inning of game one during the 2006 World Series that stretched the Cardinals lead to 4-1.

Pujols also had a three home-run game in game 3 of the 2011 World Series that tied Babe Ruth and Reggie Jackson's World Series home-run record. Elite company.

But in my opinion, the best moment of Albert's career came in the 2005 NLCS against the Houston Astros. Down by two with two on and two out, and the Cardinals certainly ready to face elimination, Pujols hit a towering home-run off the train tracks against the best closer in baseball at that time (Brad Lidge). He did this in the ninth inning in front of an electrifying Houston crowd, silencing an entire city with his deep bomb to left field. I've never heard a crowd go from so loud to so silent on TV. Some people say the ball is still heading towards the train tracks!

During his illustrious career, he has won two MVP awards in 2005 and 2008. He won the 2008 Roberto Clemente award with his off the field contributions specifically to his foundation, the Pujols family foundation which provides children and families living with Down syndrome the tools they need to thrive.

Look at what he did as a Cardinal during the first ten years of his career. From 2001-2011, he hit 445 home runs and 1,329 RBIs, an average of 132.9 per year. During one stretch, 2003 to 2006, he hit 179 home runs. His time in St. Louis was one of the greatest ten year runs this sport has ever seen.

Tonight he makes the return, for the first time since the Cardinals won the 2011 World Series, he will be playing in Busch Stadium. In his age 39 season, this will mark his first and last trip to St. Louis since repping the birds on the bat.

What Albert Pujols has done for this city, this team and this community is almost unprecedented. He is the standard for what it means to be a professional ball player and when he steps up to the plate in the first inning, he will get a loud and long standing ovation.

When I was a five year old kid, and just starting to discover my passion for baseball, I was so lucky to get to spend thirty minutes with Albert Pujols at the gym. He was also just starting his

career and could have been just another good player for my favorite team. But he quickly proved he was going to be one of the all time greats.

I was fortunate enough to give Pujols many "standing ovations" during the dozens of games I saw him play in person. Now, the rest of St. Louis can do it too, thanking him for his success on and off the field. I would love to be there for his "return". He deserves the loud long cheer and appreciation he will receive from his fans, just like me.