

# He became one of the best defensive players in MLB history — now he awaits word from HOF

BY WALTER VILLA

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Placido Polanco was nominated to the Baseball Hall of Fame. He is the all-time major-league leader in fielding percentage at two different positions and won Gold Glove awards for both.

By Pedro Portal

Albert Pujols had not yet hit any of his 633 home runs.

He hadn't yet been named National League Rookie of the Year or a nine-time All-Star. And he hadn't yet earned any of his three league MVP trophies.

Pujols hadn't even played a single major-league game. Even so, he was part of the St. Louis Cardinals organization, and he was Dominican, and that was pretty much all Placido Polanco needed to know.

## Miami Herald

Polanco, who in 2001 was entering his fourth year as a Cardinals major-leaguer, opened his home in Jupiter to Pujols and his wife for all of spring training. The two families didn't know each other very well at first, but that quickly changed.

“My wife [Deidre] was pregnant with our first son, A.J.,” Pujols told the Miami Herald. “Nobody knew if I was going to even make the team, but that didn't matter to Placido.

“I met his parents, and now I consider them my parents, too. I'm the godfather to Placido's son [Ishmael a 15-year-old center fielder at Miami's St. Brendan High].”



St. Louis Cardinals' Placido Polanco (27) and Albert Pujols celebrate the Cardinals 4-1 victory over the Arizona Diamondbacks in the Game 2 of their National League Division Series Wednesday Oct. 10, 2001 in Phoenix. Pujols hit a two-run homer in the first inning off of Diamondbacks starter Randy Johnson. (AP Photo/Paul Connors)

PAUL CONNORS AP

## Miami Herald

That spring of 2001 was the start of not only a wonderful friendship between two men who remain close, but it was also the beginning of a sure-fire Hall of Fame career for Pujols.

Meanwhile, Polanco, who starred for Miami Dade College for two years before signing with the Cardinals in 1994, has had a stellar career in his own right, although much more quietly.

The Miami resident was recently nominated for the Baseball Hall of Fame, and the 2019 class is set to be announced Jan. 22.

“I’m happy,” said Polanco, who is now a special assistant for player development with the Los Angeles Dodgers, working with minor-league hitters and fielders.

“I grew up in the Dominican just wanting to sign a pro contract so I could support my family. I never thought I would be nominated for the Hall of Fame.

“I wasn’t one of those guys who had all the talent. But I really worked hard, and hard work pays off.”





DETROIT - OCTOBER 14: AL Playoff MVP Placido Polanco #14 of the Detroit Tigers holds the MVP trophy after the Tigers won 6-3 against the Oakland Athletics during Game Four of the American League Championship Series October 14, 2006 at Comerica Park in Detroit, Michigan. With the win the Tigers advanced to the World Series. (Photo by Jonathan Daniel/Getty Images)

Jonathan Daniel *Getty Images*

## **DISTINGUISHED CAREER**

Polanco, 43, is not expected to make the cut, but that doesn't diminish a distinguished career that includes numerous highlights:

- He is the only player in major-league history to win Gold Glove awards at multiple positions. He won the Gold Glove — given to the league's best fielder at each position — in 2007 and 2009 at second base and in 2011 at third base.
- He is the only player in major-league history to hold the lifetime fielding percentage at two different positions — second base (.993) and third base (.983).

## Miami Herald

- He holds the major-league record for 186 consecutive games at second base without an error.
- He holds the major-league record for 911 consecutive fielding chances at second base without an error.
- Offensively, he has a career batting average of .297 with more than 2,000 hits and 1,000 runs scored.
- In 2007, he won the Silver Slugger award as the best-hitting second baseman in the league. He hit a career-best .341 that season, finishing third in the American League batting race.
- He was a two-time All-Star (2007 and 2011). He started the 2007 All-Star Game.
- He averaged 180 hits per 162 games in his career.
- In 2006, he was named the Most Valuable Player of the American League Championship Series after hitting .529 (9-for-17). That led to Polanco's only World Series appearance, where his Detroit Tigers lost to Pujols' Cardinals in five games.

When the last out was made, first baseman Pujols shook hands with Polanco, who was a base-runner at first, before sprinting to celebrate with his teammates.

- Polanco played 16 years in the majors, representing four teams: the Cardinals, Phillies, Tigers and, for his final season in 2013, the Marlins.



A frame with a replica of the 2006 American League Champions rings belonging to Placido Polanco

Pedro Portal [pportal@miamiherald.com](mailto:pportal@miamiherald.com)

Veteran baseball writer Bill Madden of the New York Daily News recently wrote a column explaining why he voted for Polanco for the Hall of Fame, and much of the reasoning was based on those defensive accomplishments.

Pujols, who won two Gold Glove awards and was an underrated fielder in his own right, said Cardinals manager Tony La Russa wanted to switch him to third base in 2002, moving Polanco to the outfield.

That was a move Pujols resisted, and with good reason.

“I was a good fielder,” Pujols said. “But I told Tony, ‘[Polanco] is the best third baseman in the game right now.’”

## **HUMBLE BEGINNINGS**

## Miami Herald

Polanco credits his coach at MDC, Steve Hertz, for teaching him about the value of defense. But Polanco and Hertz might never have met had it not been for Manny Mota's persistence.

Mota, who is now 80, was a major-league All-Star in 1973, won two World Series and was the all-time pinch-hit king when he retired as a player in 1982,

But in December of 1992, Mota was in the Dominican, mentoring young players such as Polanco. Mota, determined to help, got on a plane with Polanco, bringing him to an MDC practice at Bobby Maduro Miami Stadium, which has since been torn down.

Mota wanted Hertz to give Polanco a tryout.

"I said, 'Manny, I just cut down to almost my whole team, but as long as he's here, let's put him out there'," said Hertz, who had trimmed his roster from about 45 to 24.

"We put Placido at shortstop in the tryout, and he picked everything like he had a magnet in his glove. He was 5-8, 145 pounds and was just an OK runner. He didn't show power at that time, but he could swing the bat."

Hertz said if Mota had just called about Polanco there likely would've been no tryout. But because he was there, Polanco made the team, and the rest is happy history.

Polanco went from walk-on to team MVP as a freshman, starting at third base and getting drafted in the 49th round by the Chicago White Sox.



Placido Polanco played for the St. Louis Cardinals, Philadelphia Phillies, Detroit Tigers and Miami Marlins.

Pedro Portal [pportal@miamiherald.com](mailto:pportal@miamiherald.com)

But rather than sign pro, Polanco returned to MDC as a sophomore. He started at shortstop, earned MVP honors again and got drafted by the Cardinals (19th round), signing for \$7,000 and some added money for school.



## Miami Herald

And, just as with Pujols, a lifetime bond was formed, this time with Hertz.

“[Polanco] has Hall of Fame numbers,” said Hertz, who is now retired from MDC. “Talk to his [major-league] managers such as La Russa and Jim Leyland and ask them if he isn’t a Hall of Famer.”

Leyland, reached by the Herald, was asked what word best describes Polanco.

“Consistency,” said Leyland, who was the manager when the Marlins won the 1997 World Series and coached Polanco while with the Tigers.

“You never had to worry about [Polanco]. He was going to prepare, and you wouldn’t know by looking at him if he went 0-for-4 or 4-for-4. He would just go about his routine.

“He rarely made errors. He could hit with two strikes. He knew how to handle pressure. ... I’m thrilled he got nominated. He’s one of my all-time favorite players.”

Pujols said Polanco has long been a mentor for him, not just in baseball but also helping him back when he was a young parent.

“I’m honored to call him one of my best friends,” Pujols said. “I can pick up the phone at 2 in the morning and share whatever I’m going through in baseball or in life.

“He was a heck of a player — one of the best defensive infielders I’ve ever seen with my own eyes. He was so smooth.

“Sometimes fans just watch for the home run, and they forget about all the little things that win games, and that’s what Placido did.”