

YADIER MOLINA KNOWS SQUAT

HE MAY NOT BE *EL HOMBRE*, BUT THE CARDINALS' ALL-STAR CATCHER IS DEFINITELY THE MAN BEHIND THE PLATE.

BY LINDSAY BERRA | 34 | PHOTOGRAPH BY MICHAEL MULLER



THE CROWD AROUND ALBERT PUJOLS, HE OF THE SWEETEST SWING,

has become a mob. You'd think the Cardinals first baseman was giving away flat-screens rather than sound bites. Cameramen jockey for position, columnists flash elbows to get recorders within range, and well-coiffed anchors lean in with microphones. Pujols is one of 33 National League All-Stars available to the media at the Hyatt Regency in downtown St. Louis, but he is undeniably the best player in baseball and the unofficial host of the 80th Midsummer Classic, so the others can only marvel at the throng.

To Pujols' immediate left, Cardinals catcher Yadier Molina, he of the cannon arm, sits alone. He's texting his big brother, José, who's on his way to watch Yadier become the first of the three Molina backstops to play in an All-Star Game. Yadi doesn't mind being ignored; he's not one to talk about himself anyway. "Albert is a great teammate and a great ballplayer," he says. "Me, I'm just happy to be here."

But if Pujols is *El Hombre*, the Dominican successor to Cardinals legend Stan "The Man" Musial, Molina is the glue that holds the team together. In fact, he's the sport's one true game-changing catcher, playing the position like no other. Yes, Joe Mauer has won two batting titles, Jorge Posada owns four World Series rings, and Matt Wieters may be the Next Big Thing. But catchers throughout the game know who sets the bar behind the dish.

Says Posada, "The best defensive catcher in baseball is Yadier Molina."

Says Atlanta's Brian McCann, "Yadi is the best



With Molina on the prowl, no lead is safe for opposing baserunners.

defensive catcher in baseball."

Says Cleveland's Victor Martínez, "Yadier is the best behind the plate."

Molina is a throwback, a catcher in the grittiest sense of the word. He's a master of an art driven underground by a collective lust for the long ball. In the early 1980s, when offense exploded and home runs became all the rage, many clubs started signing catchers for their skills at the plate rather than those behind it. In the '90s, Mike Piazza became the poster boy, and the nuances of the position began to fade. But no catcher can drive in as many runs as he can prevent. The stat geeks have yet to master next-level fielding metrics for catchers, so Molina's defensive prowess is more anecdotal than measured, but his pickoff and caught-stealing numbers are telling. It all began in 2002, when, by his own account, he picked 26 runners off the bases

at Single-A Peoria (the team didn't keep that stat). In 2007, his fourth season in the big leagues, he threw out an astonishing 50% of the runners attempting to steal (the league average was 22%). But it wasn't until last season, when he batted a career-high .304 and his offense brought attention to his defense, that he finally won a Gold Glove.

Casual baseball fans may best know the 27-year-old Molina for, of all things, a home run—one of just 36 he has hit in his career. In the top of the ninth inning of Game 7 of the 2006 NLCS against the Mets, Molina, who had batted just .216 during the regular season,

came to the plate with one on and one out and the game tied 1-1. He drilled Aaron Heilman's first-pitch changeup over the leftfield wall at Shea Stadium, giving the Cardinals a 3-1 lead and reducing to a footnote Endy Chavez's spectacular, over-the-wall catch of a Scott Rolen blast in the sixth. But it was the bottom of the ninth that revealed the essence of Molina. With two outs, the bases loaded and Cardinal-killer Carlos Beltrán at the plate, the catcher signaled for an 0-2 curveball from closer Adam Wainwright. In a situation where a hanger or even a wild pitch could have spelled catastrophe, the rookie righthander, without hesitation, hurled a filthy bender that started up and away and bit hard to the low inside corner. The pitch froze Beltrán for an embarrassing called third strike and gave the Cardinals the NL pennant. "You don't ever have to worry about bouncing a ball to Yadier," says Wainwright, now a St. Louis starter. "He's a human vacuum behind the plate. The only thing you have to think about is making the pitch, because you know Yadi's going to catch whatever you throw."

That kind of confidence in a catcher can't be overstated. "I don't think anybody in the major leagues does a better job," manager Tony La Russa says. "Yadi is wonderful."

IN THE early days of baseball, catchers were revered. With tales of heroism from the Civil War fading from memory, the ballpark became the battlefield, and catchers established the standard for courage and toughness. They went behind the plate without any equipment, not even a glove,

Molina has helped Piñeiro, cast off by the Mariners and Red Sox, get the most out of his ability.



shielded from bats and balls only by their own bravado. They would catch fastballs with the palms of their hands, withstand a firestorm of foul tips and drop to block a skittish spitball and rise undaunted. They were judged by the number of games they could survive without sustaining a season-ending injury—a broken hand or jaw, a concussing blow to the head. Those who couldn't hack it gave up after a few innings; the best played a hundred games.



Growing up in Puerto Rico, Yadier learned from big brother Bengie, and the two remain close.

Eventually catchers donned masks and gloves, shin guards and chest protectors. But while the prototype backstop has changed—from Mickey Cochrane and Bill Dickey, through Roy Campanella and Yogi Berra, to Johnny Bench and Carlton Fisk—the essential characteristics of the catcher haven't. Molina touches his hand to the redbird logo on his chest. "If you're weak here, in the heart, you won't last," he says. He taps two fingers to his temple. "If you're weak here, in the mind, you won't last. And guts. You have to have guts."

To spot all that, you really have to look. As Molina stands in front of his locker after a May 19 win over the Cubs, without his cap or catcher's mask, his Mohawk is the first thing you notice, and his calf-scraping jean shorts and canvas Ed Hardy sneakers make him look more like a punk skater than the man who just engineered Joel Piñeiro's shutout. The pitcher had lost three tough games earlier in the month, in the middle of a 4–10 Cardinals slide, and tonight he started slowly, giving up a leadoff single to Alfonso Soriano. But five pitches later, Molina picked Soriano off first, and Piñeiro allowed just two more hits the rest of the way. "He makes it easier for

you to work relaxed," Piñeiro says of his batterymate. "You're going to struggle sometimes, and that's when Yadi is so important."

Piñeiro calls the stocky Molina the most athletic catcher in the game. Growing up in Puerto Rico, Yadi was a skinny infielder until he was 16, when he started developing the trademark family physique. Both he and Bengie, the 35-year-old starting catcher for the Giants, are 5'11" and 230

pounds; Yankees backup José, who's 34, is three inches taller and five pounds heavier. "We have strong bones," Yadier says. "We are all big." They were raised in a tiny yellow house in Vega Alta, coincidentally dubbed *el Pueblo de los Nangotaos*, or the Town of the Squatters, referring to the posture of sugarcane cutters waiting for the train. Benjamin Molina Sr., who coached baseball when he wasn't working on a factory assembly line, taught his sons to play all over the diamond and to respect the game. "When I was a kid, I liked to watch my brothers and learn," Yadier says. "They played the game like I want to play right now, aggressive and confident."

They all still learn from each other, via TV, telephone and text message, because they are bound not only by blood but also by a communal sense of pride in their profession. They believe a catcher's sole responsibility is to work for the benefit of his pitcher. "Do you know how much we care?" Bengie asks. "You can't care to win a game only. We care that the pitcher is going to have a family, that his kids will have kids. The relievers, the closers, all of them. We have a chance to make them get paid so they can have a nice life. We care about them beyond baseball."

The game has never seen anything like the Molina brothers, and now Yadi seems poised to out-Molina everyone. *The Fielding Bible*, one publication that has tried to attach numbers to the nuances of catching, dubbed Yadi baseball's best defensive catcher in 2008; José was No. 2 and Bengie No. 5. "I'm not going to be in the Hall of Fame, and I don't think José will be either," says Bengie, a two-time Gold Glove winner. "But Yadier, he has a chance." Molina's ability to block balls in the dirt is unparalleled, mostly because he knows his pitchers so well that he's able to anticipate the movement of the ball. And if a pitcher isn't hitting his spots, Molina will shift his body, not just his glove, so that the ball thumps neatly into the webbing, as near to the strike zone as possible, on every pitch. On a good day, he says, he can steal 10 or 12 strikes for his pitcher.

On most days, Molina is the only one stealing anything. To play in the major leagues, a catcher

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must get the throw to second base in less than two seconds. Most catchers are in the 1.9's; some of the best, including Bengie and José, get the ball there in the high 1.8's. Yadier is routinely clocked in the 1.7's by Cardinals pitching coach Dave Duncan, and occasionally the 1.6's. Combine that with La Russa's rule that no pitcher who takes more than 1.4 seconds to deliver the ball to home plate will make his rotation, and you need some serious speed and a large ego to even attempt to run on St. Louis.

In his career, Molina has thrown out 42.1% of runners attempting to steal, second only to Iván Rodríguez among active catchers. Only 26 runners have even tried to steal against Molina this season. By comparison, 71 runners have been successful against Red Sox catcher Jason Varitek.

With Molina behind the plate, most baserunners are just trying not to get picked off. Since 2004, he has caught 31 runners off first base, nearly twice as many as any other catcher during that time.

On July 11, against the Cubs, Molina bounced to his right, dropped to one knee to make a backhanded stab of a pitch in the dirt, and in one smooth motion hopped up around lefthanded batter Micah Hoffpauir and gunned down a bewildered Ryan Theriot. Most catchers will throw only when they have a clear line to first base, but Molina likes to tuck in behind a lefty and use him as a screen. "I'm sneaky," he says. When Fox showed the replay during the All-Star Game three days later, announcer Tim McCarver, a two-time All-Star catcher, called the play one of the best he'd ever seen.

"What separates Yadi from the rest is his mental awareness," says Astros first baseman Lance Berkman, who got back-picked by Molina last season. "He makes a terrific play and thinks to himself, *Maybe there's more I can do with this ball.*" Molina will throw regardless of outs, count, score or other men on base. If an opponent is bold enough to push his secondary lead (the extra step or two a runner takes once the pitcher commits to the plate), the ball will be there, waiting in Pujols' glove, when the player dives back to the bag. "Molina's arm cuts your secondary down by at least one shuffle," says Royals first base coach Rusty Kuntz. "If you normally get two, you get

one. If you get three, you get two. But sometimes players have to see it for themselves before they'll believe it, and those are the guys he picks off."

Most of them never see it coming. If Pujols is holding the runner, he'll flash a sign to throw, but if he's positioned behind the bag, it's up to Molina. "I have to be aware that he's going to throw every time, even though he could go the whole game without throwing," Pujols says. The simple threat of a pickoff can cause poor jumps, which not

RUNNING SCARED

As Yadier Molina's gunslinger rep has grown, stolen base attempts against him have dwindled. Since 2005, runners have tested him less than any other catcher.

RED LIGHT				
	GAMES	SB	ATTEMPTS	CAUGHT STEALING %
YADIER MOLINA	550	126	216	41.7
JOE MAUER	520	166	248	33.1
IVÁN RODRÍGUEZ	558	181	279	35.1
GREEN LIGHT				
	GAMES	SB	ATTEMPTS	CAUGHT STEALING %
JASON KENDALL	652	378	479	21.1
A.J. PIERZYNSKI	598	387	457	15.3
VICTOR MARTÍNEZ	500	327	413	20.8

Minimum 500 games played.



Pujols leads the league in homers, RBIs and admiration for his catcher.

only prevents stolen bases but also stops runners from breaking up double plays and from going first-to-third on singles.

Molina and Pujols work in brilliant tandem, but the catcher's main focus is on his pitchers. Behind every great mound performance is a savvy catcher. Don Larsen claims he didn't shake off Berra once during his perfect game in the 1956 World Series. When Dennis Martínez threw his *perfecto*, in 1991, the Expos ace said that Ron Hassey, the only man to catch two perfect games, was reading his mind. Molina has the same natural ability to quarterback a game from behind the plate. And Duncan, the only current major league pitching coach who was a catcher, has a theory about that: Puerto Rican catchers such as the Molinas—and Benito Santiago and Sandy Alomar Jr. before them—are adept at calling games because they practiced it growing up. In the U.S., high school and college coaches, obsessed with winning, have taken that job away from catchers. As a result, many catchers lean on a logical crutch when they become pros: They call pitches they can't hit rather than work to their pitcher's strengths and the hitter's weaknesses. "I think pitch to pitch along with Yadi, and I find my thinking very predictable where his is very innovative," Duncan says. "He surprises me, and the hitter, as well, with sequences or a pitch at a particular time." Molina has even been known to pitch to a hitter's strengths early in the game so, in an important late-game at-bat, he can expose his weaknesses. "Last year, I shook Yadi off

only four times," says Cardinals starter Kyle Lohse. "And I gave up three hits."

Molina's expertise behind the plate has helped him as a hitter. After batting .304 last year, this season he's on pace for a career high in home runs. He's also one of the toughest hitters in baseball to strike out. In the second inning of the All-Star Game, he stepped to the plate with runners on first and second and quickly went down 0-2 against Blue Jays ace Roy Halladay. But Molina shortened his swing and slapped an RBI single to center. "He puts the ball in play," says Pujols, who has become Molina's de facto hitting coach. "But the thing I really admire about Yadier is it doesn't matter if he goes 0-for-4 or 5-for-5; he has the same attitude



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every time he gets behind the plate. He cares about his defense more than anything because, through his defense, he will be able to help us win more. But he'll still get that big hit when we need it."

After the All-Star Game, the best defensive catcher in baseball entertained a large crowd at his locker, chatting about his RBI. It didn't matter that the reporters were waiting for Pujols, whose locker was next door, to get out of the shower. Molina always knows the score. "Is that a souvenir from your first All-Star Game?" a reporter asked about the ball Molina was holding. "No," he replied. "It's for my family. It's signed by Albert Pujols." 🌐