



Konerko: Mr. White Sox for the new millennium

*By Dr. David J. Fletcher, CBM President
Posted Monday, September 30th, 2013*

Although it was a disaster for both the Cubs and Sox, the end of Chicago baseball season is always sad.

The transition to October is a sorrowful moment even this year. Both teams finished in last place with a combined record of 129-195. That mark sets all-time Chicago baseball record for futility with the most combined losses.

This season is a far cry from 2008, when both teams advanced to the postseason together for the first time since the 1906 World Series. The first-ever Subway Series finally was a possibility. But both the Cubs and Sox quickly fizzled in the Division Series. Neither has made the postseason since.

For me as a Chicago baseball historian, the hardest thing about the season end is the fact that Sunday's curtain-closer at U.S. Cellular Field might have been the final time that Paul Konerko ("PK") appeared in a Sox uniform.

PK was pulled from the game, walking off from his first-base position, in a class move by Manager Robin Ventura. He left after one out in the 2nd inning to allow the Chicago faithful one more time to cheer for PK to shouts of "*Paulie...Paulie...Paulie.*" As is his custom, PK did not soak up the limelight and exited his as fast as possible to get to the dugout, acknowledging the fans with a brief curtain call and hugs/high fives from his teammates in the dugout. After the game, PK did address the crowd to the delight of the fans that stuck around on the final game of this nightmare season.

After appearing in 2,186 games wearing No. 14 for the White Sox, it is not certain that PK will be back for the 2014 season.



Paul Konerko talks about possible retirement in his dug-out press conference on Sept. 27.

PK has been the one constant fixture on the Chicago baseball scene for the last 15 years along with three play-by-play broadcasters (Hawk Harrelson and Ed Farmer for the Sox and Pat Hughes for the Cubs).

PK is the Mr. White Sox for New Millennium and his second ranking in most games played by a South Sider tells why he is Mr. White Sox. He is only 236 games back of the all-time Sox games-played leader Luke Appling. PK is among Sox immortals in the top five list of games-played with three of the five on the list already in the Hall of Fame and fourth, Frank Thomas (1,959 games played), ready for possible enshrinement in 2014.

GAMES PLAYED

1. Luke Appling	2,422
2. Paul Konerko	2,186
3. Nellie Fox	2,115
4. Frank Thomas	1,959
5. Ray Schalk	1,755

Minnie Minoso—often called Mr. White Sox—is 11th on the all-time list with a scant 1,373 games played in Chicago.

On Friday, Sept. 27, PK was interviewed in the dugout before the game with the Royals to address the media about speculation that he may retire, especially after a bad year for Sox team-wise and his own sub-par season that factored in various physical injuries he has endured.

His body language--- based on my medical training---made it appear he was uncomfortable talking about himself and his future during the 23-minute press conference. It was clear that at 37 he still wanted to play baseball. He appeared to float a trial balloon that he hopes that the Sox will invite him back for 2014, even if it is in a lesser role—part-player, part-mentor—at a lesser salary.

“I’m going to answer questions here,” PK said, “but I just want to say it’s all under the premise that there’s a choice and an option that they want me back, that it’s all on the basis and set to the backdrop that there’s a choice here.”

The face of the franchise said he wanted some time to sort things out and was planning to take the month of October off before contemplating his future. It seemed clear that

he had no real desire to go to another team and wear a different uniform. His loyalty to the Sox—decades after free agency made it unlikely star players play out their entire careers with one team—is clear and unquestioned. He passed up twice, in 2005 and 2010, chances to leave the White Sox for more money, a track record in which he takes considerable pride.

A forgettable season like 2013 makes 2005 even more special for Sox fans.

From my historical vantage point at Game Two of the 2005 World Series in the vast reaches of the upper deck in left field, in Section 552, I could perfectly see the flight of the ball of PK's grand slam in the bottom of the seventh as it sailed into the drizzling night sky and landed in the left-field bleachers.

Yet, the most poignant and enduring moment of that championship 2005 year was not PK's grand slam, but at the championship rally afterward. PK gave the title-clinching ball he had caught at first base to Jerry Reinsdorf, the owner-kid from Brooklyn. Despite the fact that his basketball team had earned him six rings, Reinsdorf only wanted for his baseball team to win the World Series, like his Dodgers finally did in 1955.

So, it is only fitting Mr. White Sox is the last man standing from the 2005 world championship team. In addition, PK is the only remaining member of the 2000 Central Division championship team that had the best AL regular-season record. He was a top run producer then in his second year with the White Sox, after joining the team as part of "The Kids Can Play" (a knock-off of the Who song the "Kids Are Alright") marketing campaign in 1999. Sox GM Ron Schueler went with a youth movement to re-tool the team with 19 rookies. One of the newcomers was Konerko, who had only played in 81 games over two different seasons with the Dodgers and Reds.

In Schueler's finest moment as a GM, he acquired Konerko for center fielder Mike Cameron on Nov. 10, 1998."Youthful insurance against an uncertain future," wrote then-Chicago Sun-Times baseball writer Dave Van Dyck after the trade was made. The Sox acquired Konerko as insurance for the third-base position with present-day manager Robin Ventura on the brink of free agency.

"We hate to lose a player with the potential of Mike Cameron, but we feel that Konerko can be a player that can solidify our lineup for years to come," predicted Schueler at the time of the trade.

PK endured a brain-rattling concussion in 2012 that made him miss several games after he flirted with the .400 mark at the end of May. That career-best surge prompted scribes, bloggers and broadcasters to speculate that Konerko could end up in the Hall of Fame.

It is unlikely that he will get a plaque at Cooperstown. But he will get a statue and/or a retired number at U.S. Cellular Field like three of the other five members all-time games- played list. Ray Schalk has not gotten his due yet from the Sox despite being a Hall of Famer with a 1917 World Series ring and broken dreams as a "Clean Sox" on the 1919 Black Sox AL champs.

No one has ever linked PK with PEDs. He oozes quiet leadership in his role as captain. He played hurt. He learned to check his emotions, which emerged in occasional volcanic eruptions early in his career.

Once one of the most eligible bachelors in Chicago as cited by Chicago magazine, his 2004 marriage to Jennifer Wells turned him into the consummate family man. This “power couple” has consistently given back to the community.

I distinctly remember when I first heard about PK in 1998 when I was out in Tucson, the first year the Sox moved to Arizona for spring training. One of my close friends, “Cactus Boy” Perryman, who was a rabid Dodgers fan, raved about PK. At that point, he had only played six games so far in the majors and had one hit in seven at-bats. “He is going to lead his team to the World Series,” proudly predicted Cactus Boy, who showed off PK’s Dodgers rookie card after he had been named Baseball America’s Minor League Player of the Year in 1997.

Cactus Boy was right. PK was going to lead his team to the World Series -- but for the Sox to end their 87- year World Series drought.

Now the 2013 season is over and PK has some time to contemplate the future with his family. The Hot Stove league and the challenges of rebuilding begin for both sides of town. Let us hope that PK will remember when won the “Comeback Player of the Year” award in 2004 after a sub-par year in 2003.

Our hope is before the Winter Meetings are held in early December, PK is signed to an incentive-laden one year deal. And if 2014 really turns out to be his last year that he gets a proper Sox send-off like Maranio Rivera got for from the Yankees. Knowing how Reinsdorf rewards and values loyalty, we’d love a scenario in which there will be a place for Mr. White Sox on the 2014 team.

Better yet, let’s hope that the 38-year-old PK gets rejuvenated in 2014 and sees potential for the White Sox to build around their young pitching, outfielder Avisail Garcia and infielder Marcus Siemen -- and even changes his mind about playing just one more year at a maximum to stick it out through 2015 with the hope of getting one more World Series ring.

Sitting in that sunny dugout on Friday afternoon, PK made it clear he wants to finish his career on an up note. He is a fighter who wants to come off the canvas and get back into the arena. That trait is why the Sox’s blue-collar fan base has cherished No. 14.

It would only be fitting for a new-millennium version of “Old Aches and Pains” to catch Appling and end his career with the most games played in a Pale Hose jersey sometime in late 2015 after winning the “Comeback Player of the Year” award in 2014.