



The award Cotts doesn't yet have is the one that really marks the man

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Posted Tuesday, January 28th, 2014*

Neal Cotts collects bling and awards from amazingly different sources, and almost a decade apart.

As the bitter, dangerous Arctic invasion of the Midwest swirled around outside the Pitch and Hit Club Banquet on Jan. 26, Texas Rangers lefty Cotts conjured up images of a beautiful October night in Houston during the previous decade.

“I keep (his 2005 White Sox World Series ring) at the house,” he said. “I wore it a few times to events, and tonight would have been a good night to wear it. I forgot to.”

Minutes later, Cotts collected a special keepsake for the here-and-now: the Pitch and Hit Club's Chicago-Area Major League Player of the Year Award. Few relievers were as unhittable in 2013 as the 33-year-old lefty with an 8-3 record, 1.11 ERA, with just 36 hits and 18 walks allowed (for an 0.947 WHIP) in 57 innings in 58 games – and he wasn't even called up to the Rangers until May.

A Chicago resident since his early days with the White Sox, Lebanon, Ill. native Cotts had qualified for his newest honor not only for his stellar stats line, but also having taken up off-season roots in the city of Chicago a decade ago soon after he arrived with the Sox. He stayed on through parts of three seasons with the Cubs, Cotts ranking as the only player to have performed for the 2005 world champs and the back-to-back Cubs playoff teams in 2007-08.



Jaime and Neal Cotts at the Pitch and Hit Club Banquet, where Neal received the Chicago Area Major League Player of the Year Award.

What happened in between his perfect 0.00 ERA and ring-earning feats in the 2005 postseason, and last year's astounding comeback season in Texas likely earns Cotts an as-yet-unissued intestinal fortitude award. The friendly, soft-spoken southpaw was left for dead in baseball several years in a row.

And yet left-handers are so prized in the game they typically have at least nine lives. Cotts still had some slack. He hadn't by any means used up his allotment of baseball mortality.

Cotts came back with nearly a vengeance for the Rangers 3 1/2 seasons after he had thrown his previous big-league pitch. In the interim were five surgeries, a debilitating infection, a failed physical that negated a new contract and simply lost time.

Fortunately for Cotts, not included in the dark years were a loss of confidence and faith in his ability, or the support of family. Deep down, he knew he had more baseball lives to live.

'Baseball in his heart'

"He's definitely got baseball in his heart," said wife Jaime, a native of southwest suburban Lockport who grew up a block from Hall of Famer Carlton Fisk.

"Because of that it was easy to keep going. Just do what you gotta do. He wasn't (wavering). I didn't have to think of other options, because when you have that drive like he was – and is – it's easy to support. He made it easy for me to (say), 'Keep going, Keep going.'"

Maybe Cotts already had been toughened up for his ordeal. He created a stir back in his rookie season in 2003 when Sox manager Jerry Manuel, trying to plug a hole for a team fighting for the AL Central title, named him as the surprise starter in an Aug. 28 Thursday matinee game at old Yankee Stadium. Cotts had his ears pinned back, lasting just 1/3 of an inning on a yield of five runs on four walks and three hits. His ERA for four starts in '03 was 8.18.

Later, with the Cubs, Cotts found himself going back down to Triple-A three times despite his left-handed experience and post-season success.



**Neal Cotts truly was a pitcher re-born as a Texas Ranger in 2013.
Photo credit Kelly Gavin, Texas Rangers.**

But on June 24, 2009, his real troubles began. Cotts had been demoted again after opening the season with the Cubs. He felt pain in his left elbow after one pitch while toiling for Triple-A Iowa. Tommy John surgery was soon performed, and thus his season was lost. The Cubs cut him loose.

Signing with the Pirates for 2010 Cotts injured his left hip in June of that season while rehabbing. He underwent surgery. Not long afterward, he was caught up in a nightmare.

“Five weeks after the surgery, an infection set in,” Cotts said. “I spend 10 days laid up and required three (more) surgeries. I was on antibiotics for two months. It was a pretty big ordeal.”

Flunking physical a low point

The Pirates let him go, but the Yankees took a chance with an invitation to spring training in 2011. But on Feb. 16, he flunked his physical. The Yankees released him immediately. His prospects dimmed.

“I didn’t have my mind set on getting back to the big leagues,” he said. “I had my mind set on getting back on the field to give myself a chance. Just getting back into spring training.

“If I got out on the mound for the first few times and was physically unable to do it, performance-wise not able to get people out, I would have walked away.”

After another lost season in 2011, Cotts got yet another shot, with Texas. By now he must have felt jinxed when he tore his left lat muscle near the end of spring training 2012.

“I was throwing through a pitch and it snapped,” he recalled. “I was throwing well, and I got hurt the day before we were playing in Arlington. But they saw enough and they rehabbed me.”

Cotts finally got back on the mound in a game after three years on June 11, 2011. He threw 31 2/3 innings at Triple-A Round Rock, near Austin, Tex., the rest of the year.

“I pitched here and there decently, but (overall) I did not throw great. Fortunately, they wanted me back the following year.”



Neal Cotts was in World Series-winning form on the mound most of the 2005 season (Photo courtesy of the Chicago White Sox).

Fortunately, Cotts was dealing with pitching minds who think in multiple dimensions – the Maddux brothers. Mike Maddux was Rangers pitching coach. Hall of Fame-bound Greg Maddux was a special assistant in the front office, having migrated to join his sibling after a similar two-year stint with the Cubs.

“I talked to Mike quite a bit,” Cotts said. “I enjoy his insight and knowledge about hitters, being very prepared. Greg was around quite a bit, especially through the minor-league season.”

One more hurdle remained. Cotts failed to make the Rangers out of spring training 2013.

“Down in Triple-A, I threw the ball well,” he said. “Down there, I was confident I should be able to repeat it and handle this.”

A May day to remember

Time and coaches who believed in him healed him completely, though. Cotts finally was recalled. On May 21, 2013, after a four-year absence from the majors, he made a six-pitch return against Oakland. Cotts remained on target the rest of the season.

Cotts feels he’s just older and wiser.

“Maybe I’m not that different of a pitcher (compared to 2005),” he said. “Maybe a little more mature, a little smarter. In terms of stuff-wise, it’s pretty similar. I have a little bit different breaking ball.”

Cotts’ personal life, though, is far different than 2005. Jaime Cotts had just started dating the pitcher in ’05. Now they have two young children. They will stay rooted in Chicago.

“He had lived here before we met, and he had bought a place,” Jaime said. “When it came time for us to get serious, I said Chicago is our home, we’ll stay here (year-round). He’ll shovel, I’ll shovel. The kids come out, they help me.

“We’re not going anywhere, we love Chicago. He fell in love with it when he came here to play, so I don’t have to twist his arm to stay



Neal Cotts as a Cub in 2008. He was the top bullpen lefty on Chicago teams that totaled 196 regular-season victories. Photo credit: [terren in Virginia](#).

here. We miss the winters in Texas when it's so hot, I say, 'Give me some snow!' It's 100 degrees when you wake up in the morning. It's humid, totally different than Arizona. There's no breeze that goes through that (Ballpark at Arlington) stadium."

Hyper-supportive parents

Cotts' new baseball home in Arlington results in a longer commute for parents John and Jane Cotts to watch their son play. They simply had a five-hour drive up Interstate 55 in his Sox and Cubs seasons.

The elder Cotts apparently are determined drivers. They came to the Pitch and Hit Club Banquet to see his acceptance, then immediately left around 8 p.m. for Lebanon, near Belleville. Despite horrible road conditions with blowing and drifting snow that apparently shut I-55 and I-57 through the open farm fields of central Illinois, they somehow plowed through, arriving home at 1 a.m.

Neal Cotts certainly put aside youthful memories of Cardinals games to toil for the Cubs.

"One thing I remember about the North Side is clinching (the 2008 NL Central title) at home (against the Cardinals), which we never did with the White Sox," he said. "That's a pretty special moment, clinching the division and being able to celebrate with the fans. That's truly a pretty cool thing."

So was playing for two emotional managers in Lou Piniella and Ozzie Guillen.

"The start of my career it was Lou and Ozzie," Cotts said. "Very interesting. They had some similarities and some distinct differences."

The high point always will be 2005, a season in which he was 4-0 with a 1.94 ERA and just 38 hits given up in 60 1/3 innings. Cotts appeared in all four World Series games against the Astros. He was credited with the win in the drizzly Game 2 powered by Paul Konerko's grand-slam home and shockingly won on Scott Podsednik's ninth-inning clout.

"I don't think I really realized (the magnitude)," Cotts said. "It was only my third year in the big leagues. It was such a great run we were on. Now that I'm older, almost 10 years later you realize how difficult it really is.

"There were so many unsung heroes on that team – Geoff Blum, Pablo Ozuna. It was a total team effort from everyone who stepped in that locker room."

There will be one last bit of business connected to 2005 in 2014. Cotts will say his farewells to Konerko, laying his burden down after 16 years of being the mule pulling the Sox wagon. Since Konerko will play primarily against left handers, his number likely will come up against his old comrade.

"It definitely will be special," Cotts said. "I didn't face him last year when we came to town. Probably good for me. I haven't thrown against him since I was with the Cubs.

“He’s a great person. That’s the Chicago White Sox, a guy who’s been there forever. I hope it goes how he wants it to go this year, how he wants to end. I think he’ll do a great job. He means a lot to the organization and a lot to the fans.”

Cotts paid plenty of tribute to “King” Konerko, but what he pulled off is truly in the spirit of the Sox captain.

Remember when Konerko was hit in the face, but still took his base before cooler heads pulled him? Laser focus on the next obstacle and don’t give up. Never, ever look back.

And that’s why Cotts, given good health still a long way to go until his own retirement, will be able to say good-bye to Konerko the old-fashioned way, pitcher to batter.