



Cast off twice by Yankees, Lincolnwood's Kontos finds his heart in San Francisco

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In the end, it didn't matter that George Kontos did not get to achieve glory with the New York Yankees, his original organization.

"I've always been very fortunate," said the personable 27-year-old Lincolnwood resident and alum of Niles West High School and Northwestern. "My goal has always been to get to the major leagues and stay there. I first I thought it was going to be with the Yankees. Then I was traded. You have to roll with the punches."



George Kontos addressed the Pitch and Hit Club banquet after receiving his award.

Not even little taps on the chin the way it has turned out – given that right-handed reliever Kontos will soon be receiving his World Series ring. Timing and location are everything. Kontos could not continue with the Yankees, who fizzled out in the American League Championship Series in 2012. No problem. He was the cherry on the sundae in the San Francisco Giants' pitching-rich Fall Classic triumph.

Everywhere he went in the Chicago area during an off-season just concluded, Kontos was approached and recognized. He greeted all comers with enthusiasm. Same as he handles Giants fans, who might travel better than any other rooters of any baseball team these days. When you see fans donned in orange and black going home from Wrigley Field on the Yellow Line (Skokie Swift) L after a Cubs-Giants game, you know you're a nationally-popular team.

"We really have the best fans in the world," Kontos said. "They're amazing. They follow us. They always cheer. They're very respectful. They're the reason why we won. They cheer their butts off. It's really great to have them in our corner."

“In 15 or 20 years when we’re out of the game and nobody knows who we are anymore, we’re going to look back and be thankful they were there wanting autographs and spending a little bit of time with us.”

Perhaps no Giant appreciates the fans more than Kontos, considering his journey.

Giants, not Yankees, right place to be in 2012

A fifth-round draft pick of the Yankees in 2006, he was let go in the Rule 5 draft to the Padres in Dec. 2010. But on March 14, 2011, he was returned to the Yankees. On April 4, 2012, Kontos was traded to the Giants for Chris Stewart.

“I’ve been very fortunate,” Kontos said. “The year went by so quickly. It was such a roller-coaster ride and ended on such a high.

“My approach to the game, my dedication, my work ethic, none of that has changed. It doesn’t matter where you are, what level you’re at. All you can do is keep working hard every day and work for your ultimate goal. Now that we’ve won a World Series, our goal is the same for next (fall).”

Loaded on the mound, the Giants could afford to pitch an inconsistent Tim Lincecum out of the bullpen. Short on thumpers in the lineup, they adapted a total team offensive approach, until Panda-like Pablo Sandoval developed muscles just when it counted as October came to a close.

Kontos did his part as a setup man with a 4-2 record in 44 games. He had a 2.47 ERA with 44 strikeouts in 43 2/3 innings. His WHIP was a nifty 1.053. Manager Bruce Bochy entrusted him to pitch in eight postseason games. Kontos’ feats earned him the Chicago-area Major League Player of the Year Award from the Pitch and Hit Club at its Jan. 27 annual banquet in Lombard.



George Kontos with Dr. David Fletcher (left), president of the Chicago Baseball Museum, and longtime Chicago writer-broadcaster John Reyes (right).

“For most of the season, we didn’t have defined roles,” Kontos said. “Toward the end of the season, Sergio Romo was named the main closer. But everybody was rooting for everybody else. Nobody was sitting there upset that somebody was throwing whatever inning they thought they should be throwing.

“Everybody went out there cheering for their teammates, from the starters to the seven guys in the bullpen. That was huge for us. When one guy struggled, the next guy came in and picked him up big time.”

Good hitting is said to be contagious. On the Giants, quality pitching spread like an epidemic.

“Being up there, being up there around guys like Lincecum, and (Matt) Cain and (Ryan) Vogelsong, who was a fierce competitor – those are the guys who showed the confidence in me,” Kontos said. “When I came in with their guys on base and I got the job done, every time they came up to me, they showed confidence in me. That made myself more confident. It was definitely great to have them on my side.”

Bochy the new Phil Jackson?

And it was great to have a Zen-like manager in Bruce Bochy running the show. Bochy is now just one ring behind Tony La Russa.

“Boch’ is the best,” Kontos said. “Whether we’re up by 10 or down by 10, you’d never know because he’s so even-keel. He keeps calm all the time. That definitely rubs off and gives everyone a sense of calm as well. You’re never going to see him panic, never going to see him get over-excited. He’s a guy who’s going to be sitting there managing the same way regardless of the situation. That trickles down to everyone on the bench.”



The Kontos family at the Pitch and Hit Club's annual banquet, where George was honored as Chicago Major League Player of the Year. From left: father Nick Kontos, brother Chris Kontos, George Kontos, sister Dana Kontos and mother Theodora Kontos.

Bochy, an old cerebral catcher, can probably appreciate a multi-dimensional athlete who came from a non-traditional baseball background. Niles West is not a baseball factory. While competitive and an alma mater of Yankees manager Joe Girardi, Northwestern is not a regular Big Ten baseball power.

“Someone once told me coming out of high school and making my decision to go (to college), ‘If you’re good enough and work hard enough, the scouts will find you.’ Keep working, even in Chicago where it’s cold, you can go inside and keep working. The talent is there and the scouts will find you. That’s what happened to me. I didn’t go to a powerhouse baseball school.

“My main reason for going to Northwestern was it had such a reputation for academics. I majored in economics. I finished school when I was rehabbing from my Tommy John surgery. I think I could do something in the business world. Or I think I wouldn’t be too bad up in the booth commenting on some games.”

Kontos is not waiting for his career to end to start helping others from the breadth of his experience. He participated in pitching clinics in the northern suburbs during the winter.

“With the World Series attention, it’s great people look up to me,” he said. I’m glad to be able to come here, give back, help the kids and give pitching lessons.

“A lot of people helped me when I was younger. I’m very fortunate to be in the position to give back.”