



## ***Konerko reserved tough side while ‘good cop’ persona earned admiration, affection***

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One unfulfilled wish as Paul Konerko retires to his family in Scottsdale, Ariz. is never getting the chance to see him manage the White Sox.

Before he hired Robin Ventura, then-Sox GM Kenny Williams briefly entertained the thought of making Konerko player-manager. The team captain, respectfully and affectionately nicknamed “King” by his teammates, likely would have turned down the offer. But the thought of the brainy, disciplined Konerko formally running a game and handling the clubhouse was enticing.

Questions about why Konerko pulled a pitcher would have evoked his typical *detailed* response, providing overtime work of the type employed for Ozzie Guillen for Team Transcription up in the press-box. The process of Konerko debating umpires might have inflated game times beyond their present bloated lengths.

One thing is sure, though. Konerko would have one motivated team that would not have risked seeing both sides of his good cop-tough cop persona. The Sox would have wanted the typical, encouraging, boosting side of their boss to stay in effect full time. They wouldn’t have wanted to tempt fate to be on the wrong side of his steely adherence to baseball preparation, fundamentals and etiquette.

I’ve seen that side in the long process of covering one of the top gentlemen of modern baseball times.

When the Sox were trying to fit Brian Anderson into their center-field job in 2006, they had a daffy, carefree lefty pitcher personality masquerading as a position player, and usually hitting like a moundsman, too. One day I asked “BA” for a few minutes of his time. Sure, said the University of Arizona product, just join me in one of the lounge chairs at the east end of the Sox clubhouse.

Uh-uh, I responded. Media cannot sit in those chairs. Anderson countered. He wore me down. Nervously, I sat in the chair as I began the interview while scanning the surroundings for potential witnesses. Two minutes later, Konerko and A.J. Pierzynski came



**Brian Anderson experienced the tough-cop side of Paul Konerko.**

out of the trainer's room in quick succession, spotted this violation of routine and reacted. They knew Anderson all too well and did not fault me. Looking at Anderson, it appeared laser beams would shoot out of the captain's eyes a la a Fifties "B" sci-fi monster. I wanted to crawl under the chair.

No sane Sox would want to be on the receiving end of Konerko's displeasure. That's why he had the natural temperament to manage. The tough cop side would have always been held in reserve, as deterrence. The clubhouse always would have wanted to gain the benefit of good-cop PK.

### **Respect for self, others**

If needed, Konerko would never pull his punches, verbally. At the end of the 2010 season, after the relationship between Guillen and Williams started developing cracks, Konerko bluntly projected that 2011 would be better if some things were "cleaned up." They weren't, and Guillen jumped ship with two games to go in '11.

Konerko simply was a man who not only had respect for himself, but for others. Famed for playing dinged, if not outright beat up, Konerko never used injuries as an excuse. In fact, he'd usually decline to discuss them in more than cursory detail. One day about three years ago, Konerko appeared to be slowed by another of his aches and pains. I asked if it was a factor. He replied it wasn't. The interview soon ended.

Five minutes later, Konerko called me back to his locker. He took my years of give-and-take with him into account. He half-apologized for his previous answer. Basically admitting he was playing through injury, Konerko said athletes typically don't want to draw attention to their hurts, lest the opposition take advantage. The gesture of respect for a veteran media member will never be forgotten.

Konerko's tolerance of pain was at 1960s' football player levels. Most famous was being hit in the face by a Carl Pavano fastball, and then getting up two minutes later to take



**Paul Konerko won't miss the group interviews he had to conduct almost daily. But like the team leader he was, he handled the task with the same dedication he employed on the field. Photo credit David Fletcher.**

his base. The Sox concocted a TV commercial the following year about a parched runner almost collapsing in the desert. He suddenly looks up at a uniformed Konerko, who pulls out a video device playing a tape of the Pavano incident. Konerko says not a word, projecting a guilty look onto the runner. Shamed, the runner picks himself up to resume his journey.

There was no reason to obtain Konerko's off-season number. He'd give us 2 1/2 seasons' worth of answers in any one season. He might use two clichés, if that many, per season. Most times, you couldn't use more than one-third of what thoughtful answers he gave you. His powerful baseball mind was stimulated by what Irv Kupcinec used to call "the lively art of conversation." Konerko would acknowledge when intelligence was injected into the flow. "Good question," he'd say.

Konerko's focus was so strong he never got ahead of himself. You could not ask about season performance goals as he took his baseball life day-by-day, at-bat by at-bat. So as the finality that was experienced this past weekend was beginning to loom in the distance a few years back, the question of his career end game had to be raised. But it had to be asked carefully, as Konerko would dare not project himself several years into the future.

### **Daily preparation was Konerko's key**

So I approached it conceptually: how will you know when it will be time to wrap it up? The quality of performance, maybe? Bat speed and ability to handle pitches? Injuries? No, that was also getting ahead of himself. His daily base was the determining factor. Konerko's answer: he'd know if it was time if he couldn't undertake his typical level of daily preparation.

And that was the most amazing thing about the man. He prepared himself for a career that finished just below a surefire Hall of Fame level.

Konerko had a powerful bat that could catch up with the best fastball. Case in point was one homer in 2010 off Cubs flame-thrower Andrew Cashner. The pitch came in at 100 mph and left the park at 102 mph, or so the story goes.

But Konerko also had physical limitations. He was one of the slowest players in the majors. He had not stuck at catcher, then third base, limiting him to first base. To stay in the majors, and then thrive for the better part of 16 years, he had to make the most of his abilities he did possess. The end result was the second-best offensive portfolio in Sox history and authorship of the only World Series grand-slam homer in Chicago baseball annals, South and North Side.



**Ryne Sandberg (left) was one of the few Chicago stars with a farewell ceremony, at Wrigley Field in 1997. But Frank Thomas (right) had to wait until after his career ended for a big celebration at The Cell, in 2010.**

## **Rare sendoff for Chicago star**

The least that could have been done for Konerko after he spread his positivism and determination around The Cell and baseball as a whole was the low-volume farewell tour and sumptuous good-bye ceremonies before game No. 161. In that respect, he's rare in the city's diamond timeline. Only Ryne Sandberg, with a farewell day before his Wrigley Field finale in 1997, was given the proper sendoff.

Frank Thomas was allowed to walk as a free agent after 2005 amid acrimony with Williams, and finished up with the Athletics and Blue Jays. His Sox ceremonies were held after his retirement in 2010, four years before more Sox hoopla took place over his Hall of Fame induction.

The Cubs did nothing for Ernie Banks in what became his final home at Wrigley Field in Sept. 1971. Perhaps owner Phil Wrigley figured he had already staged a day in Mr. Cub's honor seven years previously. The only acknowledgement something was coming to an end was manager Leo Durocher, no Banks fan, batting the 40-year-old cleanup after he had played little in '71.

Ron Santo and Billy Williams, who also had special days at Wrigley Field earlier in their careers, were dispatched via trades in 1973 and 1974, respectively. They had no celebratory sendoffs. Six-time 20-game-winner Fergie Jenkins had two Cubs stints. He was released in spring training 1984, his career ending at 41.

So Konerko is a lucky man. But in his case, luck flowed from preparation. Maybe Jose Abreu will take over as team leader as he becomes more comfortable in the majors and begins to learn English. But even Abreu will admit he cannot be another Konerko in depth of personality and impact on his teammates.

In a society of so much conflict, so much tragedy, so much unfairness, it's comforting that in Konerko's case, good things happen to good people.