

Alumni Corner: Matthew Kokot (2013-2015; New York)

By: Emerson Lovell



Matthew Kokot is the Senior Associate Counsel for the Minnesota Twins. He is a 2012 graduate of Columbia Law School, and worked at Cleary from 2013 through 2015, where he focused on litigation.

When did you work at Cleary?

I worked at Cleary from 2013 to 2015.

Why did you choose Cleary?

The people I met during the interview process. I think there are a lot of firms that are pretty similar on paper and the main way I felt I could distinguish a lot of these places was the chemistry I felt during the interviews and recruiting dinner. Then you factor in the firm's reputation, and the combination of that and the fact that all the people I met seemed like people I'd enjoy working with tipped the scales to Cleary.

Awesome, and after you left Cleary?

I went to a firm called Kobre & Kim for four years, and then joined the [Minnesota] Twins in September of 2019.

Can you tell me about your current position and what the typical day to day is like?

Sure. My title is Senior Associate Counsel. I'm the second lawyer in the Twins' legal department, and I report directly to the General Counsel. There has been a very steep learning curve since my career prior to joining the Twins was exclusively litigation, and my job with the Twins is almost all transactional work. A big part of the job is reading, revising, and drafting contracts, but the days really are all very different. The legal department is one of the only departments that deals with virtually all of the different business units, so one day I might be reviewing agreements for our baseball operations department, the next day I might be reviewing waivers on ticket backs or for other events run by the Twins. I also deal a lot with sponsorship agreements and luxury suite agreements.

Given that is so different from what you did prior to joining the Twins organization, what do you like most about what you do now?

It's a lot of fun for a number of different reasons. First, it's very different from working at a law firm—and I really liked the law firms I worked at—but going from an environment where you're working almost entirely with other lawyers to one where almost everyone else you work with is not a lawyer, and they all have very different but important roles to make the business work, creates a very different environment. And I really like having the opportunity to interact on a regular basis with people whose jobs are so different from mine and who I wouldn't normally have the chance to interact with at a law firm.

Second, after working in big law firms for 6 years, it is a nice change of pace to join a small legal department. We have only two lawyers, and I'm in direct and regular contact with the General Counsel, who has a ton of experience and is a great mentor and person to learn from. In some ways, the job feels similar to my clerkship, which was another experience I greatly enjoyed.

And, lastly, it's baseball. I'm a huge baseball nut. I have wanted to work in baseball for a long time and while there is far more to working for a baseball team than the games on the field, ultimately everything I (and everyone else working for the organization) do on some level ties back to baseball. And for me, that makes everything a little more fun.

Who's your favorite baseball player?

My favorite player growing up was Jon Olerud. I was a big Mets fan, which for years seemed like a terrible decision since the Yankees won every year and the Mets were generally pretty terrible, but it may have paid off now because I don't think the Twins would have hired me if I were a Yankee fan! Currently, though, I don't know if I have a favorite player. I really just want to see the Twins do well and I'm looking forward to watching them and learning more about their players as the season gets underway.

Do you find that you get to do anything legally that you wouldn't have otherwise been able to do if you weren't working for the Twins?

Yeah! If I weren't working for the Twins I'd still be doing litigation, so I think all of the contract work I do now, I wouldn't be doing if I weren't with the Twins. And while there are some law firms that have pretty robust sports practices, it's rare to be able to do 100 percent sports-related legal work unless you're working for a team or a league.

Since you were doing litigation before, do you have any favorite memories or favorite Cleary moments?

What really sticks with me about my time at Cleary is how sophisticated and interesting the work is. It's now been five years since I left Cleary, and I still talk pretty regularly about the cases I worked on there, including at my interviews for my current job. I realize that's

not a particular "moment," but I think it is a testament to Cleary that all these years later I am still talking to people about the things I worked on when I was there.

What advice would you give to a young Cleary associate who may want to pursue a similar path or pursue their dream field like you did?

You have to be persistent and have a pretty thick skin. The Twins were not the first baseball team I applied to and I dealt with a good bit of rejection before this opportunity came around. It's easy to get discouraged but you have to keep pushing and realize that there's not a lot of teams, there's not that many jobs, and each job is going to be really competitive. It's not like applying to a law firm that's looking to hire a class of lawyers. Usually, teams are looking to fill one specific role and have a pretty specific idea of what sorts of experience they are looking for, so for any one job, your odds of getting it are not great. But if you're persistent about it and continue to put yourself out there, taking more shots at it will give you a better chance long-term. You also have to be really flexible. For someone who wants to work in sports, you have to be willing to go anywhere and do anything. I would likely not be working in sports if my mindset was, "I live in New York, so I'll only work for the League, the Mets, or the Yankees." It's kind of like being a weatherman. You may need to go far from home if that's where the station that needs a weatherman is, and if you don't, you may never be a weatherman.

Is there anything you would've done differently on your path to where you've gotten?

Given how everything worked out, it's hard for me to second-guess my career too much. There were certainly times in my career where I wasn't happy or I felt adrift, but right now I am where I want to be, and I don't think I'd be here if I didn't make the decisions I did during my career.

Where do you see yourself in 5 years?

I see myself here. I think that's the first time I've been able to answer that question with any degree of confidence. I really like my job and I want to continue doing it. I didn't take this job to use it as a stepping stone to something else, I came here because I really wanted to work for the Twins and I intend to keep doing that.

How has COVID-19 impacted your current position outside of the season not starting at its usual time?

It's been pretty jarring. The beginning of March was around the clock busy getting things ready for the season and then everything came to a screeching halt and we had to pivot to having to prepare for the pandemic. I think a lot of the things I was working on that would be kind of business as usual for the big lift of getting ready for the season were replaced by figuring out how to deal with this generational-type event, including lots of contingency planning that is hugely important but very much not "business as usual."

Last question! More so a personal one for me: Is Joe Mauer a first ballot Hall of Famer?

I hope so! But I would be pretty surprised if he gets in on the first ballot. He's certainly a Hall of Fame talent, but because of all the injuries, I think his numbers probably fall just short of the threshold for enshrinement. But, one thing that I think could work in his favor is that catchers are really underrepresented in the Hall of Fame, and I think at some point you'll see a wave of modern catchers like Buster Posey and Yadier Molina go in. If that happens, Joe Mauer has to go in with them. He's an MVP winner, a three-time batting champ, a six-time all-star, and may very well be the best catcher of the 2000s thus far. If he doesn't get in, it's hard to see why any other catchers from this era would.