

**MENTAL TOUGHNESS TRAINING MANUAL
FOR BASEBALL/SOFTBALL PLAYERS**

John Lefkowitz, Ph.D.
David R. McDuff, M.D.

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**MENTAL TOUGHNESS TRAINING MANUAL
FOR BASEBALL/SOFTBALL PLAYERS: BASIC PRINCIPLES**

Winning is not your sole responsibility.

Baseball is a team sport. There are other players on the team. You need their support and expertise. It's not just up to you.

Nobody expects perfection. You are going to strike out, give up hits, or make errors. When not performing, you can make adjustments and improve.

You are not just a baseball player.

Playing baseball is just one of many things you do well. The result of one at bat, pitch, or fielding play does not make or break you as a ball player.

You have friends, family, and other interests and skills. You're an athlete, a son, a daughter, a coach, a teacher, a community leader; perhaps a husband or father.

You cannot control everything.

You have no control over the team's schedule, the weather, the umpiring crew.

You have no control over who is pitching and what pitches he/she will be throwing.

Focus on what you can control: timing, swing, pitch selection, mental strategies.

Staying positive is not enough.

Staying positive is a good goal, but not realistic all the time. Self-talk including self-criticism happens to everyone. You cannot easily stop these thoughts, nor should you try. You can develop strategies to manage self-talk more effectively.

Stuff happens.

Life happens. Sometimes all sorts of lousy things impact on our lives. A friend gets traded or moves to another team, a family member gets sick or injured, a relationship is strained or ends, a nagging injury starts up again. This will impact on baseball.

Baseball is part of life. Problems are temporary & will change. Keep your perspective.

CHAPTER 1: MENTAL TOUGHNESS TRAINING - WHAT IS IT?

Mental toughness is more than just mental. It's also physical and emotional.

In order to be mentally tough on the ball field, you must have talent and be in peak physical condition. Your technical skills have to be sharp. It is also important to recognize that the

physical, emotional and mental sides of your self affect each other. Mental toughness training allows players to tap into emotional and mental resources that keep play at its prime as often and consistently as possible.

Jim Loehr (1993) is a noted sport psychologist who has worked with many top athletes over the last twenty years. He suggests the following definition for toughness: "**Toughness is the ability to consistently perform toward the upper range of your talent and skill regardless of competitive circumstances**". Toughness is not about having a "killer instinct" or being mean or cold. Loehr describes four emotional markers of mental toughness.

- **Emotional Flexibility** - The ability to handle different situations in a balanced or non-defensive manner. Emotional flexibility also speaks to the skill of drawing on a wide range of positive emotions - humor, fighting spirit, pleasure.
- **Emotional Responsiveness** - You are emotionally engaged in the competitive situation, not withdrawn.
- **Emotional Strength** - The ability to handle great emotional force and sustain your fighting spirit no matter what the circumstances.
- **Emotional Resiliency** - Being able to handle setbacks and recovering quickly from them.

Like other aspects of mental toughness, these skills can be learned. It is not something genetic. For some players it comes more easily than for others. In general, to play at this level, you probably already have many of these skills. However, for many players, there is often room for improvement.

By being mentally tough, you can bring all your talent and skill to life consistently. Being able to use your emotional life effectively will help you perform at your prime more consistently. The use of thinking skills, imagery, confidence building and other skills described later can be powerful techniques in reaching a high level of mental toughness.

CHAPTER 2: BUILDING SELF-CONFIDENCE

WHAT IS IT? Self-confidence is the belief that you can handle the demands and challenges of the game. It is based, in part, on how you have performed in previous games. It also depends on how well you manage your inner critic and the way you think and feel about baseball.

WHY BOTHER? Self-confidence comes more easily to some players than others.

When you're feeling confident, you play better. It's easier to manage intensity, you're more focused and better able to handle adversity.

MAKING IT WORK FOR YOU. At times, even the most self-confident ball players have lapses, begin to doubt their abilities. In order to give your self-confidence a boost, here are three practical and useful approaches.

(1) Develop a list of personal affirmations - Write down a number of positive statements about yourself. Start with just a few and add to it over time. These are meant to be general sport-related affirmations. For example:

*I have made great progress this year. *I am mentally tough

*I love the challenge of critical situations *I focus well under pressure

Once you have come up with a number of affirmations, write them on an index card and repeat them on a regular basis. They should include important aspects of your game that have meaning for you and can be repeated in the locker room, dugout, or even on the field. It is useful to change or add to this list over time.

(2) Develop a list of achievement reminders - Three British Sport Psychologists, Bull, Albinson and Shambrook (1996) recommend having this second list which speaks to your best previous performances. For example:

*I played great on the road this year. *I was 1999 college player of the year

*My field play saved a game last month *I batted over .300 in August

Don't worry about being modest. This is for your eyes only. Like the personal affirmation list, you can update and change the list as needed. Try and be specific, yet it does not have to be related to winning a game or award. Feel free to review it as much as necessary.

(3) Personal pep talks - Recall some of the most useful things a coach or friend ever said to you about baseball or even life. Remember how that felt and how you were able to use those words and support. Repeat them to yourself. Add to it, develop it. Write it down or just focus on it when you need to.

CHAPTER 3: THINK LIKE A WINNER - COGNITIVE STRATEGY

WHAT IS IT? Cognitive strategy involves the relationship between thoughts and athletic performance. The way you think, directly affects feelings and behavior. Even though your best performance often occurs with no conscious thinking ("being in the zone"), this does not happen all the time. Developing these cognitive strategies can help limit distractions and aide performance.

WHY BOTHER? The pressure of the game can lead to self-criticism and negative self-talk. This will likely affect your performance. It is possible to alter this self-talk in a way that benefits performance.

MAKING IT WORK FOR YOU: USING SELF TALK. Self-talk is the way one makes perceptions and beliefs conscious. What we say to ourselves can be positive or negative. The first step is making it conscious.

(1) Awareness - First, you need to be aware of your inner voice. Some of you may be very conscious of your internal dialogue. If not, pay attention. Recall your best and worst game from last season. What was going through your head during each game. Many ball players find they do best when they are focused on what they were doing (engrossed in the task of hitting, pitching or fielding). In contrast, poor performance often occurred when worrying about the result ("I have to get a hit or strike this batter out or the team will lose").

(2) Focus - Certain words can help you regain or sharpen your focus. You need to find what works for you. For example, "See the ball", "Protect the plate", "Down in the zone", or "Get a good jump" can act as cues.

(3) Building Confidence - Self-confidence has to do with your expectation for success. Self-talk can either boost or undermine your confidence. Since you can usually control self-talk, keep it focused on performance, not outcome or your sense of self. For example, say "I can hit off this pitcher, just stay loose and focused". In contrast to "I'm an idiot if I strike out again".

(4) Changing bad habits – Self-talk can be an aid in correcting technical errors. Lets say your not getting down on ground balls. As you see the ball hit in your direction you may say "down" or even describe the entire motion "track the ball, bend the knees, glove down".

(5) Taking it up or down - There may be times you want to pump yourself up, or cool yourself down. This depends on the game situation and your internal state. Certain words can energize - "lets go; pump it; boomer time"; whereas other words will be more relaxing - "settle down; cool off; take it slow".

MODIFYING SELF-TALK. We all have an internal critic. That's that voice that comes out of nowhere and is negative, critical and seems to want to make you choke. The following techniques will help you deal with your internal conflict.

(1) Staying positive is not enough - Staying positive and upbeat is great, but not realistic all the time. It's a myth to think you should always be positive, and if not, something is wrong. Instead, listen to your internal critic and put it to work for you in a positive way. There are four steps for managing the critic.

Listen without debating - Note what is being said.

Example: "You will never hit a knuckleballer, never have, never will".

Examine the statement - Use facts, reason and rational thinking.

Example: "When was the last time I faced a knuckleballer, how well did I hit him, how does this compare to my season average, has this always been the case, etc."

What can you learn - Once you have explored the reality of your self-criticism, what can you gain from this.

Example: "I've actually done all right against knuckleballers as long as I concentrated on protecting the plate and seeing the rotation of the ball".

What else can I work on - How can I make this a good learning experience.

Example: "If I time my swing a little differently, I will have an edge".

(2) Reframing - This involves putting a different meaning on the criticism or experience. For example, your pitching in a critical situation, the game is on the line, you feel your heart pounding and you begin to sweat. Your critic says "Nervous as hell again, here comes another walk or hit". Counter with, "Man I'm pumped and excited. I'm feeling the energy I need to take it to this batter".

(3) Thought stoppage - This is for a particularly troublesome criticism that keeps coming up. In order to do this, you can use a verbal (e.g. stop) visual (e.g. imagine a red light) and or physical (e.g. snapping your fingers) cues.

CREATING A PLAN. You may already do some of these things well, however, each skill can be further refined and developed. Remember, this manual is just a starting point. After trying some of these cognitive strategies, consider creating a self-improvement plan with a team assistance specialist.

CHAPTER 4: IMAGERY TRAINING FOR PRIME PERFORMANCE

WHAT IS IT? Imagery training is the mental practice of a skill or given task without actually doing it. Imagery involves more than visualization - it includes all other senses as well.

WHY BOTHER? Imagery is a powerful tool when used correctly. It can provide an edge in enhancing physical performance and is useful in both pre-competitive and competitive situations.

MAKING IT WORK FOR YOU. Imagery is probably associated most with Olympic Track and Field Athletes or Gymnasts. However, any skill related performance, such as batting, fielding or pitching can benefit from using imagery. These six skills are foundations for using imagery as part of training.

(1) Practice - Just like developing any new skill, imagery requires practice. It requires commitment and should become a part of daily practice. Fortunately, imagery can be practiced on a bus or in the dugout.

(2) Relaxation - Generally, imagery works best when your relaxed. When relaxed, you can focus more on the imagery. It is often useful, but not necessary, to engage in some type of relaxation exercise prior to using imagery.

(3) Timing and Control - For the most part, imagery is optimal when used in real time. It can be helpful to slow down or speed up the images to analyze certain techniques, but replicating actual playing conditions is usually best. Controlling images is also important-use positive, confidence-building ones.

(4) Using internal and external perspectives - Depending on your own style, you will tend to imagine scenes from either inside your self, or as if watching your performance on a screen. Being able to use both forms of imagery is ideal, although you will tend to use one form over another.

(5) Using all five senses - Imagery is more than just visualization. Use your sense of smell, hearing, touch and even taste-be creative. **Smell** - Allow yourself to smell the grass and dirt of the playing field or the smell of hotdogs and popcorn from the stands. **Hearing** - Imagine the sounds of the crowd, the voices of other players, the umpire calling balls and strikes. Hear the crack of the bat hitting the ball solid and strong. **Touch** - Feel your cleats digging into the batters box. Feel your feet, hips and shoulders rotating as you move wind up to pitch.

(6) Triggers - Triggers can be certain words or phrases that call up specific images of performing a skill well. These triggers are often associated with a strong emotion. For example, "explode" may be a trigger for taking a strong cut at the ball or "snap" for a curve ball off the plate.

Sergei Bubka, the Russian world record holder in the pole vault, describes using imagery as a part of his daily workouts. He even hangs out with the gymnasts in order to better understand how best to use mental practice techniques. Bubka states that he uses both internal and external imagery, as well as visual and feeling senses.

Clearly, Bubka is not a baseball player. However, he is one of the most successful track and field athletes ever. Bubka, and many other athletes from a wide range of sports, have found imagery to be extremely valuable in enhancing performance. It is important to recognize it works best when combined with actual practice of the skill. Keep in mind imagery is not used instead of regular batting, pitching, or fielding practice.

Imagery can also be used in a more general fashion. For example, lets say your having difficulty hitting left-handed pitchers. It may be useful to just imagine yourself hitting left-handers more effectively. How might that look? What would that feel like? Be creative in allowing yourself to imagine new ways of hitting left-handed pitching.

Your imagination can have a powerful effect in shaping your reality. You may be surprised

at how helpful it is to imagine yourself being successful in game situations which have been difficult in the past. The more you practice and rehearse these skills in your head, the more likely it will affect your actual performance.

MAKING A PLAN

1. Before starting an imagery program, it is important to review the benefits and limitations of imagery. It can be useful, but it is not a magic bullet.
2. It will work best if you're committed and fully integrate imagery into your regular training routine.
3. You may need assistance to help develop, refine, and evaluate an imagery training program.

CHAPTER 5: GOAL SETTING STRATEGIES

WHAT IS IT? Goal setting means achieving a specific level of performance in a certain amount of time. Goals usually focus on improving a measurable skill, such as "I will raise my batting average by 10 points or lower my ERA below 4.00 before the end of the month".

WHY BOTHER? Valuable, widely used technique in sport psychology. Results in higher level of performance. Provides focus, facilitates effort, leads to new skills.

MAKING IT WORK FOR YOU. In general, the following five strategies provide the basis for fully utilizing goal setting as a way for improving performance.

(1) Challenging yet realistic - Finding the right balance between pushing oneself without setting yourself up for failure. Example: Become a better power hitter by increasing home runs and runs batted in.

(2) Be specific - Put a number on it. Examples: Hit 10 more Home Runs (20 to 30); Hit 30 more RBI's (60 to 90); Reduce the number of walks (3 to 2 per game)

(3) Breaking it down - Use short term goals as stepping stones toward long term goals. Example: **Regular Season** - Season is six months; **All Star Break** - Home Runs 15; RBI's 45; **Monthly** - Home Runs - Five per month; RBI's - Fifteen per month; **Weekly** - Home Runs - One or Two, RBI's - Three or Four

(4) Implement strategies to achieve goals - In order to obtain your specific goals, you

must develop specific skills for achieving them. This can be broken down to three separate times of year.

Winter, off-season

Develop enhanced weight training/flexibility program
Study video tapes of your swing or pitching motion.
Compare with best hitters or 20 game winners/closers.
Talk with best hitters/pitchers on team.

Spring Training

Work with hitting coach on stance, position in box and timing.
Observe best power hitters on own and opposing teams.
Set goals for batting practice as Spring progresses.

Regular Season

Monitor progress (see below).
Continue to make refinements during batting practice.

(5) Chart it - Absolutely critical. Needs to be part of daily routine. Get obsessive. Example: Use index card or make a chart. Put it in a visible place, such as inside your locker; make a copy and place it in your travel bag during road trips.

(6) Evaluate - Crucial to continually evaluate and assess effectiveness of goals. Goals can change, need to evaluate with input from others (coaches, trainers, and assistance specialists). Establish regular meeting times to evaluate goals. Example: Figure out the best time for regular meetings on progress and follow through with it.

SETTING A PLAN

- 1) Before beginning a program, it is important to set your goals in writing with input and assistance from others.
- 2) Don't do too much all at once. Keep it manageable by starting with one or two goals.
- 3) Take it seriously and make it a part of your training. Regular re-evaluation of goals is critical for this to be successful.

CHAPTER 6: PLAYING IN THE ZONE - PART I

WHAT IS IT? Think about those times you've been "in the zone", "played out of your head". It's amazing. It's as though you can do no wrong. You've probably played your best games when "in the zone". This section is about helping you get into a zone. miracles don't happen, but there are things you can do to help move toward a higher level of consistent performance.

WHY BOTHER? Clearly, you play your best when performing at your peak. However, many ball players don't realize there are specific mental skills you can use that help you move toward prime performance.

MAKING IT WORK FOR YOU. There are three critical areas for achieving more consistent performance: (1) Developing a consistent pre-competitive routine; (2) Your intensity level staying cool under pressure; (3) Being aware of your attention and the way it affects performance.

PRECOMPETITIVE ROUTINE. Virtually every athlete has had the experience of being in the zone. Research has shown that for most athletes the experience occurs spontaneously and is generally short-lived. Being well prepared every time you take the field will set the stage for a consistent high level of performance.

(1) Develop a consistent pre-competitive routine - Being prepared eliminates problems and increases the likelihood of success. This involves everything you do the day of the game from the time you wake up until you take the field.

Your routine will vary depending on whether it is a day game or night game, home or away. It is useful to develop a routine for each circumstance. Remember, these are routines not rituals. Routines are adaptable, you can adjust them depending on the situation. Rituals are superstitious, they tend to control you and can get in the way.

There are three stages in a pre-competitive routine: **Pre-Game, Arrival at the Stadium, & Final Preparation.** Each phase of your pre-competitive routine should address both physical and mental preparation. The pre-game stage should also address equipment.

PRE-GAME

Equipment - Make a checklist of everything you need to take to the stadium. Include bats, glove, batting gloves, uniforms, toiletries, etc.

Physical - What time do you wake up? What do you eat for your meals? Do you do any type of aerobic or anaerobic exercise prior to arriving at the stadium? What other obligations do you need to take care of before going to the stadium? It is important to address all of these questions and develop as consistent a routine as possible.

Mental - This may involve reviewing the team your playing, the pitching staff, studying videotapes and reviewing signs. Some athletes engage in relaxation, meditation or reviewing or writing in a journal (e.g. concerning goals, use of imagery or thinking strategies).

ARRIVAL AT THE STADIUM

What time do you arrive? When are the meetings? Do you have any specific meetings with any of the coaches or trainers?

Physical - Warming up, batting and fielding practice should all be leading up to greater intensity and focus. Note if there are any specific skills you need to work on. Does the trainer need to work with any physical problems and how might this effect your game?

Mental - Examine line up and opposing pitcher. How will this affect your game and what will be expected of you? How have you done against this pitcher, this team, in this stadium? How will this affect your mental game? Assess your intensity level. Do you need to raise or lower it? How is your focus and concentration? Is anything getting in your way today? What do you need to do to improve focus?

FINAL PREPARATION

This is the time for any fine-tuning just before the game. Do you do any specific warming up just prior to the game? Do you typically check your glove, bats, cleats. How is your focus and intensity? Is it necessary to make adjustments on thinking, imagery or relaxation strategies.

Bull, Albinson and Shambrook (1996) divide the final preparation phase into three distinct phases - **preparation, focusing and execution**. Before discussing these it is important to understand the use of **attentional cues** since they are used sequentially in each phase.

Attentional cues can be either verbal, visual or physical. These concentration cues help you intensify, relax and concentrate. There are no set cues; instead, only unique groups that work differently for each player.

Visual cues involve intense focus on something specific in the environment. For example, the writing on the bat, the logo on your batting glove, the pitcher getting set, or even looking at home plate for a moment.

Physical cues require doing something. For example, tapping home plate with your bat, wiping your hand on your shirt, taking a deep breath.

Verbal cues are a single word that you repeat silently. For example, ready, contact, protect, focus, relax.

The following are the three phases described above which integrate the use of attentional cues.

(1) Preparation phase - Use of physical cue to tune in attention. Three deep breaths to help relax upper body.

Occurs in on-deck circle. Physical cue may be knocking dirt out of cleats, putting on batting gloves or just the feel of the bat as your swinging.

Take practice swings; analyze pitchers motion, and pitch selection.

Evaluate game situation and what is expected of you; deep breath.

(2) Focusing phase - Approach and breathe deep. Focus eyes on visual cue. Use imagery to visualize successful at bat.

Take final practice swing; enter batters box.

Imagine making good contact with ball.

Focus on pitchers' movement.

(3) Execution phase - Repeat a positive verbal cue. Perform.

Repeat a cue word such as "power", "smooth", "contact".

Protect plate & swing bat.

CHAPTER 7: PLAYING IN THE ZONE - PART II

INTENSITY REGULATION - STAYING COOL UNDER PRESSURE

Intensity is the way your mind and body become energized. How to reach the best intensity level for prime performance differs for each ball player. One key goal is to identify an ideal level of intensity and achieve it.

Utilize the Goldilocks principle - find just the right amount of intensity-neither too much nor too little. Over-intensity happens when you get "too up" for a game. You can feel this in your body - such as butterflies, sweating, heart racing, or shortness of breath. You may also find yourself agitated, tense and distracted. This can also involve excessive negative self-talk (e.g. "I know I'm going to have more errors than hits today").

Sport psychologist Jim Taylor (1996) identifies **five major causes of over-intensity**: (1) The demands of the situation; (2) Your resources to manage the demands; (3) Consequences of the situation; (4) The meaning placed on the consequences; (5) Recognition of bodily reactions.

For example, Joe was pitching in his first playoff game (demands), which he believed was greater than his skill (resources) to win the game. He was convinced he would be blown out by the third inning (consequences) that would hurt his career (meaning).

Focusing on consequences and exaggerating the meaning of one game can lead to problems with over-intensity. It can be useful to monitor any irrational thinking and modify it in order to keep your perspective.

Social causes, such as expectations of others players, coaches, fans, media, family members can also impact on your intensity level. Ball players can develop a fear, perhaps outside of immediate awareness, that they will not be loved or supported if they fail to meet certain expectations.

Environmental factors also contribute to intensity level. This involves unexpected or uncontrollable events. For example, field conditions, a last minute pitching change, or a long rain delay. All of these factors interfere with pre-game routine and make it more challenging to reach and sustain intensity.

Under-intensity is not as common, but does happen. These are the times when it's hard to "get up" for games. You are dragging and lack your usual energy. This results from an obvious physical event such as a cold or jet lag. It can also be psychological in nature, such as overconfidence or an early sign of over-training or burnout.

GETTING TO PRIME INTENSITY. Remember, there is no magical formula for achieving prime intensity. It will be different for each of you. Also, each of you requires

different things in order to reach prime intensity. **Figuring out what your best intensity level is the first step.** This requires taking a close look at what you do before and during a game. This is done at three levels - **Physical, Thinking and Feeling and Social/Environmental.** It is important to look at these factors from one of your best and worst games

(1) Your physical state - What was that like pre-game? How relaxed were you and how did your body feel? Be as specific as possible. Did this change during the game? What was it like in the field and in the batters box?

(2) Thinking and feeling - What was going on in your head before and during the game? What were you feeling? Did this change when the game started?

(3) Social/Environmental Causes - Were you playing home or away, day or night? What was going on with the other guys, coaches and at home? How was the team doing overall and how close a game was it?

CHANGING YOUR INTENSITY LEVEL. To get to your prime intensity level you must focus on three areas - **physical, thinking/feeling and control.**

PHYSICAL

Breathing - Most of us rarely pay attention to how we breathe. However, when your in a high pressure situation, pay attention to your breathing. When you tense up, you begin to take short, shallow breaths. Some guys even hold their breath without realizing it. This makes the tension worse. In order to relax, deep breathing is the key. It will help you loosen up. It is important to feel your breath go all the way down, deep into your abdomen, fill up, and out slowly through your nose. This skill is easy to develop and it works.

Deep muscle relaxation - When you feel yourself tighten up, this can help bring you down and keep you loose. It will also help you be more aware of tension in your body. This skill involves the progressive tightening and relaxing of all muscle groups throughout your body. This helps you feel the difference between tense and relaxed muscle groups, and allows you to loosen up in any situation.

Centering - Combine this with deep breathing. This involves standing in a position of strength, as if trying to keep someone from pushing you over. You focus on your center of gravity and your feet against the floor. You use deep breathing by taking in fresh air, exhaling with a key word and relaxing.

THINKING AND FEELING

Guided Imagery - This involves the ability to visualize a peaceful scene, such as the beach or the mountains and really get into the details of it. For some people, music can be used with imagery if it helps you settle down.

Thinking Skills - Two important thinking skills are reappraising and key words. **Reappraising** refers to the consequences and meaning we attach to certain games or situations. When you evaluate things in a negative or exaggerated fashion your intensity level tends to shoot up. It is important to carefully evaluate your situation and your performance skills accurately. **Key words** - Certain words can be used as triggers or cues to help modify your intensity. The first set of words are for bringing down your intensity, these include:

settle down, cool, easy does it, focus, relax, breathe, stay loose. The next set are for pumping up your intensity - explode, get pumped, hustle, aggressive, fire up. Choose which words work best for you, or come up with your own.

Acceptance - Lets get real. There are times when we all get nervous before a game. A well known football coach used to ask his players who got nervous before the game, he found that the guys who admitted to nerves actually played better. The coach also said he got nervous about the guys who said they were never nervous. Keep in mind that nerves are a part of the game and are one way that your body gets pumped and prepared to play well. These skills are excellent ways to use this energy and channel it to improve your performance.

CONTROL

Satchel Paige once said "**If it's outside your control, ain't no use worrying, cause it's outside your control. And if it's under your control, ain't no use worrying, cause it's under your control**". Right on Satchel.

Just worry about what you can control. Make a list of those things you can control, such as your conditioning, your swing, how you handle yourself in the field, etc. On the other side, list what is outside your control, the opposing pitcher, the weather, the days lineup, etc. Focus on the control side of the list.

Unexpected events and unfamiliarity are also outside of your control. It is useful to identify the things that can go wrong prior to or during the game and develop strategies for handling them. For example, a delayed flight gets the team to the stadium late. How can you shorten your pre-competitive routine while remaining sharp for the game? It may be useful to make a list of unfamiliar events that could occur and effective strategies for handling them.

CHAPTER 8: PLAYING IN THE ZONE - PART III ATTENTIONAL FOCUS

Sport Psychologist Robert Nideffer (1992) believes that playing in the zone and choking are both examples of altered states of consciousness (ASC). According to Dr. Nideffer, it all depends on the way you focus your attention.

An altered state of consciousness occurs when you experience a change in your sense of time, perception of the world, or ability to think and remember.

An example of time distortion occurs when seeing an enjoyable movie and being surprised that two hours have just gone by. This is known as time compression. A perceptual distortion can occur when dreaming. During a dream, common objects can take on strange qualities, shapes and sizes.

The same thing can happen in baseball. When you're hitting well, the ball seems to slow down and you see it better. When you're not playing well, everything seems to speed up and you don't see the ball as well. If you have ever played in the zone or choked, you have the ability to alter your state of consciousness.

In order to do this, we need to look at four different types of concentration or attentional focus (Nideffer, 1992).

(1) Broad internal focus - This involves thinking, planning and analyzing. This happens when you're studying signs or opposing teams. You are focused on making sense out of a lot of information.

(2) Broad external focus - This happens when you have to look out at what is going on around you. For example, when you come up to bat and see how the infield is positioned, who is on base, what signals are being flashed.

(3) Narrow internal focus - This means rehearsing a performance before we do it. For example, when playing in the field, you think what you will do if the ball is hit to you.

(4) Narrow external focus - This is about reacting or performing. The pitch is on the way to the plate. The ball has just been hit toward you. You can often see this narrowing of attention if you watch a good hitter's eyes just before he hits the ball.

Typically, you constantly move from one attentional focus to another. Playing in the zone happens when you're immersed in either an external or internal focus of attention. Generally, when playing well your attention shifts less frequently. Your focus is more external and you spend little time "in your head". Athletes often describe the experience as if they're not thinking, "It just happens". In contrast, a poor performance often happens when your focus is mostly internal.

When your attention is external, performance seems automatic and you don't need to think about what you're doing. As a result, you can stay focused on task relevant cues, which allows you to have a greater awareness of what is going on around you. At these times you feel more in control and almost as if you know what pitch is coming next.

When you choke, your focus is probably too much inside your head. This makes it difficult to pay attention to what is important. The ball, the pitcher, the situation. Things don't seem as clear and it's harder to anticipate well.

Keep in mind that these categories are not rigid boxes, but places on a continuum. Your goal is to move steadily toward a narrowing, external focus. Even when playing well or in the zone, this is not necessarily your upper limit.

In order to help you move along the continuum toward a narrow external focus, you need to develop ways to stay outside of your head. This involves identifying distractions and refocusing attention. No athlete is able to stay in the zone all or even most of the time. The goal is to help you keep your momentum toward the development of concentration skills and the ability to quiet distractions.

Sport Psychologist Shane Murphy suggests using the four R's when you get distracted: **React** - - - - **Relax** - - - - **Reflect** - - - - **Renew**. All of this should only take a few moments and can be used in virtually any situation.

REACT - When you commit an error, you get upset with yourself. Alright, don't ignore it, but don't let it become so big that it messes up every aspect of your game. Allow yourself the emotional reaction, just keep it in perspective.

RELAX - Use one of the methods described earlier to help you settle down - key words, breathing, imagery, centering, or muscle relaxation.

REFLECT - Figure out what interfered with your performance, then move on. If the infield is faster than expected, make an adjustment for the next grounder.

RENEW - Let yourself refocus. Imagine yourself getting out of your head and shifting to a narrow, external focus, like before you made the error.

CHAPTER 9: TEAM BUILDING - THE POWER OF THE GROUP

WHAT IS IT? Baseball is both an individual and a team sport. It is important to recognize that just as you have an impact on the team, the team has an impact on you. Groups are very powerful. The team is a group that impacts on your performance in obvious and subtle ways.

WHY BOTHER? By understanding better how groups function, you can better appreciate how the team affects you and how you can use the power of the group to improve your performance. For example, when the team is playing better, and everyone seems to be hitting well, it often helps you play better. Similarly, when the team is slumping, morale is down and every game seems like a chore, you tend to play worse.

MAKING IT WORK FOR YOU. There are many different ways to understand groups. The functioning of the group depends on many different factors, such as leadership style, morale and cohesion, social dimensions and success rate.

One important area to highlight concerns the roles of different players and how these affect

the team. All groups tend to assign roles to different individuals. There are the formal roles, such as your position and number in the batting order, as well as informal roles (Carron, 1988). Informal roles are important, but come about in ways that have more to do with one's personality style than your playing ability. For example, informal roles are team clown, team leader, moody player and perhaps scapegoat.

According to Dr. Carron, three conditions are necessary in order for there to be a link between individual roles and team effectiveness. **These are role clarity, role acceptance and role performance.**

Role Clarity - This concerns the extent to which players are clear what their formal role is on the team. A lack of clarity can lead to confusion, reduced confidence and increased conflict among other players or coaches.

Role Acceptance - This is the extent to which players are satisfied with their assigned role. It is possible to be clear about your role, yet be unhappy with it.

Perceived Role Performance - This concerns how well players are performing their specific roles. Even if one is clear and accepting about their specific role, without adequate performance, overall team cohesion may suffer.

Often times, other team members may be unaware of the unique challenges of a specific role, which can lead to undue criticism. Sports psychologists have found that when individuals on the team have a full appreciation for the demands of different positions, they are usually more cohesive. This can be achieved by simply talking more to each other about your specific role. Some ball players have even tried playing another position (e.g. catcher, pitcher, bench player) in order to get a better sense for the demands of that role.

When the three types of roles work for the majority of players on the team, the team will function better under stress and work together better as a unit.

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