CONDITIONING THE MIND:
APPROACHING IT ONE PITCH AT A TIME

with Ken Ravizza, Ph.D., California State University, Fullerton

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Softball and baseball pitchers have to examine each pitch for a pitch at a time—they have to take responsibility for each pitch. As pitchers, they cannot control what goes on around them, only how they respond to the same situations. Pitchers have no control over the coaches, umpires or batters; just over the pitches. This is a key concept in understanding what it takes to be a pitcher.

Responsibility and Control

In order to control a pitch, players first must have control of themselves. Self-control leads to body control, which leads to ball control. When a pitch is thrown high, what often happens is that the pitcher worries about the mechanics of the pitch; when in fact, the problem is that the player is uptight and trying too hard. This is then manifested in the mechanics of the high pitch. The mechanical breakdown is mental, not physical in origin. Something can be done to improve performance, once the pitcher takes responsibility and recognizes what is going on.

An analogy of a traffic light is appropriate here. When driving a car, you approach an intersection. If the light is green, you see it, you are aware of it and you go. If it’s yellow, you need to be a little more conscious. Check the rearview mirror, check the intersection and make the decision to go or to stop. If the light is red, you have to stop. How a pitcher handles each pitch in its approach, follow through and execution has much to do with how well he or she is able to recognize what color the traffic lights are. What happens when s/he starts to get out of control? What happens to the body? What happens to various thoughts and emotions?

Release and Standing Tall

Once pitchers recognize where they are, they need to have a release. I tell the players they have to envision a toilet behind the mound. If they have a lot of red lights going on they go over to the toilet and stand there. It’s a space where they release the negative. When they get their foot on the rubber they have to mentally prepare for their next pitch. They can’t carry the last pitch to the rubber. After the release, a pitcher has to stand tall and think, “I’m in control of me.” This is the big difference between the big league, Olympic players and lower level professional and college players. For the true professional, the control issue is a non-issue.

Planning

To review, I recognized, released and am standing tall. The next step is planning. For the pitcher, it’s selection, location and commitment to the pitch that is critical. Once a player commits to the pitch s/he must live in the target and be focused on the target. If you do all of these things you have control and can make a commitment. The planning process takes time. The pitcher on the mound shouldn’t rush things. When garbage hits the fan things have a tendency to speed up. The pitcher starts running to the rubber and throwing the next pitch immediately with the thought, “I’ve got to get out of this!” There are players on first and second with no outs and the pitcher is trying to get out of the inning. Triple plays aren’t that common. This is where I tell pitchers to slow down and stop trying to get out of the inning—to take the next pitch, get the selection and location and commit to it.

Players who are out of control are into the “gottas.” “I gotta show them.” “I gotta bear down.” If they think this way, commitment to the pitch is lost. They are just too emotional. Once a pitcher has planned and committed, it allows him to trust the pitch. Pitching is like hitting and catching. You see the ball and you hit the ball. You see the mitt and the ball hits the mitt.

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Selection is the first part of planning. If a player has a fastball hit out of the park, how does s/he go back to that pitch? The shot out of the yard creates a yellow light. The issue then becomes taking enough time to come back to the pitch. Some players try to make the perfect pitch or the most powerful fastball ever. Both of these ways of thinking show a lack of trust in committing to the pitch. So the correct way to think is, “What happened with the last fastball? Was it a good pitch or not?” One way to help commit to the pitch is to visualize the next fastball. Not everyone is capable of doing this. Those that can’t visualize can commit in other ways, such as the way they grip the ball. I have one pitcher who pushes down on the rubber with her foot, which solidifies her commitment to the pitch.
Location is the next part of planning. There are some considerations, such as the strengths and weaknesses of the hitters or the situation in a game. Abilities of the field players to cover a certain area, etc., help dictate where the pitch should go. But, it all comes down to whether or not the pitcher has command of that particular pitch.

**Trusting What You Have**

When players are lucky, they’ll be in the zone maybe 20 percent of the time. The other 80 percent of the real world struggle is controlling, planning and committing. It’s all about compensating and adjusting. It’s a matter of feeling comfortable when you are uncomfortable. It’s about learning to deal with adversity. Players have to learn how to trust what they’ve got when they’re not in the zone. To trust, you have to be committed to your pitch. If you’ve got 60 percent, you have to take that 60 percent, go after the hitter and get it done.

**In Control**

Exercises to Get There and When Do You Know Your There

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The second exercise is learning to practice breathing techniques that relax. They have to know how to get to a calm and quiet environment. The third thing is that pitchers have to develop a solid routine. This is the stuff they can depend on when the garbage hits the fan, their routine to release. This develops confidence in dealing with adversity.

Routine is not to be confused with superstition. Superstition is something totally out of the control of a pitcher. Routine is preparation. It’s not magic, but something that the players work on. A big physical cue for good routine is good breathing technique. If you can’t keep a good slow breathing pattern and are hyperventilating, then step off the rubber and start over. The routine should be simple. Keep it simple, smart (KISS). If it gets too complex, it’s hard to replicate time after time. Steady breathing helps keep it simple.

Other cues that could be part of the routine include picking up and throwing down dirt for release. Another would be gripping the ball tightly and then releasing the tight grip. Again, a way to trigger the feeling of release. Some pitchers have a focal point in the outfield that they look out to, which gets their attention and gets them back in control. They see the focal point, turn and focus on the catcher’s mitt. How do you know things are working? The best indicator is results. Are you getting them? Are you feeling good? These are the two big indicators.

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But what happens if the breathing and routine doesn’t work? Then the issue turns to the players to self-evaluate. Were they in control? Were they committed to their plan? Did they trust their stuff? Each pitcher has to find where the breakdown is happening. Are they failing to gain control? Is the toilet stuffed up and not flushing? Is it not being ready when the foot is on the rubber? Are they not committed to the pitch?

There are ways of looking at failure other than saying that a particular pitcher is a choker. We have to find where the breakdown is occurring and not immediately classify a player as a choker. A great example is the Yankee Rivera in the seventh game of the World Series. His quote was right on target, “I did my best, I made a great pitch, he beat me.” He took total responsibility and did not make excuses. He did the best he could. It just didn’t work out. The next time the results will be different. Kids have to learn this.

**The Committed Pitch**

When can players tell that their commitment to a pitch is full and total? The commitment is solidified when the players can say, “I have confidence in using what I’ve got in executing the pitch. I’ve got 60 percent, here comes my 60 percent.” It’s the ability of a player to commit to what s/he has on that day. It’s unrealistic to commit to 100 percent if it isn’t there. Knowing this comes only through practice and experience. Players are committed if they can see the pitch and it’s clear as to what they are doing. The thinking is clear. Players will tell you this. When they struggle they’ll say, “Wow, I don’t know what happened there.” This is where things start to speed up and players lose control.

Another way to seal commitment is what I call the trust breath. The planning is done. The selection, location and commitment are there. Now, with a foot on the rubber, inhale and exhale slowly. You’re moving from a conscious thought process to trust in your stuff. You can’t pitch and think at the same time. The breath is the bridge that brings players to the trust mode.

**Execution—Practice versus Game Situation**

How does a player transfer routine, planning and commitment from the practice field to game situations when more is on the line and distractions are greater? This issue is executing the routine during practice. It’s similar to when pitchers do dry or shadow work without a ball. They are developing mechanics. Not only can they be working mechanics but also their mental routine. Practice breathing and the release. An example is found in the game of golf. A golfer goes to the driving range with a bucket of balls. He’s hitting them with the driver. One thing he is doing is practicing the swing, but not practicing playing golf. You never use a driver 20 times in a row. In other words, the coach should make the environment of a practice game relate to when a pitcher is pitching to a hitter, getting bad calls from an umpire, etc. This allows for practice in dealing with these situations and overcoming the adversity. And it all should happen without the coach saying something after every pitch. This is more game realistic.

When I work with teams on this issue, I tell them one important thing—the bigger the game the more you make it like practice. The mindset is then that the game is just another practice. The last thing you want to do is go for a personal best. This is what Olympic athletes say, “I approached this event or race just like another practice.” Why? They have experience executing on the mound. The hidden message in all this is to increase the quality of practice. If it all happens in practice, the game should be a celebration.

**More Information Please!**

For a copy of the author’s book *Heads Up Baseball, Playing the Game One Pitch at a Time*, call 1-800-578-4636. The price is $5.95 plus $3.95 shipping. You may contact Ken Pavizza at his e-mail address: krvavizza@fullerton.edu