SportPsych Consultation Issues in Professional Baseball

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This article discusses the development of mental skills training for professional baseball players and coaches. The basic educational model involves providing information, skills practice, and support for the athlete who wants to improve his mental game. The basic philosophy employed is an experiential process that facilitates the athlete's understanding of mental skills training. Over time, skills are refined and adapted to meet the athlete's unique needs. The practicing sportpsych consultant must follow a number of operating standards to ensure the trust and respect of both players and management. The most difficult step is getting the commitment from a professional team. This article discusses an approach to making contact, guidelines followed for developing a mental training program for a professional baseball team, and some technical aspects to consider in developing a mental training program. It focuses on the range of services provided to players and coaches in group formats and on an individual basis, both at the major league and minor league levels. Finally, there is a discussion of problems inherent in working with players, coaches, and management and how to cope with them.

My work with professional baseball began 5 years ago when I first began working with a professional baseball organization. I have continued to develop and implement the Mental Training Program at both the major and minor league levels. I have also consulted with two additional professional baseball teams as well as numerous professional players from various teams, on an individual basis, during the off-season.

Philosophy

My philosophy of service delivery reflects my training and experience as an educator. Whether in the classroom or on the field, my primary purpose is to facilitate individual achievement. In sports this involves developing mental skills to handle adversity both on and off the field. My focus is to teach athletes to deal with performance pressures, personal issues that interfere with performance, and how to separate personal issues from performance issues. My approach is to provide information, skills, and support for the athlete who wants to improve his

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mental game. In terms of providing information, this is the time to connect with the athlete on a personal level and let him know that you understand and respect the adversity inherent in achieving one's goals in professional baseball. Many athletes believe that some of their thoughts, beliefs, or attitudes about themselves or their performance are not shared by others and that they alone have trouble dealing with distractions such as negative self-talk, self-doubt, and so forth. To the extent that I convey that mental training is simply a further extension of awareness (Ravizza, 1986), the more likely the athlete will integrate mental training concepts into sport performance and daily life.

The skills training aspect is really the simplest part of the educational process because the development of skills is technical in nature. Once the skills have been taught, there are always times when athletes need support to validate the efforts they make to change their behavior. A sincere commitment to incorporate mental skills into performance is a difficult task for most athletes because they have been conditioned to perform; minimal emphasis has been placed on examining subtle obstacles to achieving full potential. Ultimately, the baseball player has to be in control of himself before he can control his performance (Ravizza, 1989).

The process of reversing traditional attitudes that avoid self-awareness is a difficult one in professional sports. Baseball may be the most traditional professional sport because the old school believes you just play the game. The typical approach of these coaches is to tell the athlete to "just relax" and/or "concentrate." This old school of thought would simply deny that playing in 35°F temperatures is cold. The new school acknowledges that it is cold and uses specific techniques to play through it.

Nevertheless, players need support in making changes. My work is to listen to their performance concerns, fears, insecurities, and insights, and I teach them selected mental skills to cope more effectively with situations that are obstacles to performance. My efforts are focused on facilitating the athlete's understanding that the routines we develop together are the result of the athlete's willingness to explore his performance vulnerabilities and develop a strategy that helps him cope in pressure situations.

**Operating Standards**

There is no magic formula to gaining the trust and respect of athletes and coaches. However, there are a number of important principles that I have come to live by as a result of my experience with professional baseball players. Some of these standards are directly applicable to other professional sports.

First, flexibility is a necessity because of rapid changes that occur in management and player personnel (May & Brown, 1989; Salmela, 1989). Prepackaged programs are not appropriate because the needs of players and the team are very different. For example, I approach a young inexperienced team differently than I do a team of established veterans. I believe that my ability to tailor my approach to meet the unique needs of players and coaches has sustained my 5-year relationship with the one organization.

Another operating standard related to the concept of flexibility is adjusting to the situation. In every situation there is the ideal way to do your job, and then there is reality. The reality may be that a particular coach believes mental training is worthless or a superstar may ride the rookie who spends time with the sport-
psych consultant. I emphasize to players that there is limited control over what happens around them or in a game situation, but they can certainly control how they choose to respond to a particular situation (Ravizza, 1989).

Another important operating standard is the issue of confidentiality and player selection. Before I begin working with a team, I get assurances from management that my discussions with players are confidential. Before I share any personal or confidential information with coaches, I obtain the player's permission. In many cases the information I share with coaches is at the player’s request. I have chosen not to provide input to management about player selection, changes in line-up, or decisions about sending players down to the minor league. I do this to encourage player honesty and to avoid any conflicts of interest. On both of these issues, there are differences of opinion among sportpsych consultants. Some consultants are involved with player personnel decisions and others are involved in the enforcement of organizational drug policies. For me, this goes against the priorities I have established in an education based model, but I can understand and appreciate the variations in this area.

At the university and Olympic levels, some coaches are receptive to the use of various psychological assessment inventories. At the professional level there is limited support for any form of psychological testing in the absence of a guaranteed result. As a consequence, I do not use psychological assessment inventories because the resistance by players, coaches, and management is too strong. In addition, my experience has been that general psychological and/or sport psychology assessment are not generally useful (Halliwell, 1989; Salmela, 1989). Standard inventories do not accurately evaluate the unique individual perceptions of situations or identify specific problems that occur in the professional environment (Orlick, 1989). I do use feedback sheets, and in some cases individually designed monitoring devices. If an individual's behavior changes to such a degree that it affects his ability to function, then I refer him to a clinical psychologist.

The Business of Baseball

It is important to remember that professional baseball is a business and that mental training is not currently a priority with most professional sports teams. This reality based perspective should influence the structure of a mental training program; services to groups of players must be fit into the regular team schedule. It is difficult to establish that mental training has a direct cost benefit to an organization, so it is important to operate the program to avoid disincentives to participation by players and management.

The coaching and management turnover in professional sports creates uncertainty and instability for mental training programs. A head coach or general manager who actively disagrees with mental training concepts can easily cause the program to be terminated. Generally there is no active opposition; however, lukewarm support from the head coach or general manager can slow the progress and the full potential of a mental training program.

Finally, negotiating of fees is a somewhat difficult task when you consider that the person you are meeting with negotiates million dollar contracts on a regular basis. Your initial focus should be to obtain a formal written agreement with at least a 1-year term and a reasonable rate of compensation. The general manager has a standard rate or budgeted amount to offer. You should recognize
that your bargaining power in the first year is limited and, like the rookie player, you may opt to accept the standard agreement or price. If you are unhappy with your compensation, then it becomes your responsibility to clearly explain to the organization in subsequent years what it is you do and why your value to the organization is higher than the current rate.

**Making Contact**

Generally speaking, professional baseball teams have a variety of devices to select consultants who offer specialized services. In addition, mental training concepts are not fully accepted or understood by professional baseball organizations. Access to decision makers is considerably more difficult than at the university or Olympic level.

Prior to making any contact at the professional level, I learned the specific demands of baseball by working with the California State University, Fullerton, baseball team for 4 years. It is essential to know the sport, learn the terminology, and experience the baseball subculture before any attempt is made to work with a professional team (Ravizza, 1988). This process oriented, pay-your-dues approach is important in gaining credibility with players and coaching staff.

In the absence of having playing experience in the sport at a professional level, sportpsych consultants must fully understand the sport-specific demands of players and coaches (Dorffman & Keuhl, 1989). At the outset, I got together with individual professional players and coaches for extensive discussions of their baseball experiences. I also met with Bruce Ogilvie to gain insights from his years of consulting experience. Having this familiarity with the specific stresses of professional ballplayers permits me to be more sensitive to their needs and makes my presentations more relevant.

The initial contact with a professional baseball team comes either through outreach by a team representative or at the initiative of the sportpsych consultant. In my case, I have received inquiries from three professional baseball teams. The services have ranged from a consultation assessment with specific recommendations for development of a mental training program to a full-scale ongoing mental training program which I am responsible for at the minor league and major league level. Certainly the sportpsych consultant who writes or calls the club office has a shot at gaining access to the coach or general manager, but normally these inquiries do not receive a serious response.

If you are able to arrange a meeting, you should be prepared to put the organization in contact with other successful college or Olympic teams who can attest to your ability to work successfully with a professional baseball team. Most professional teams will ask for a reference before hiring a consultant. In fact, you should offer a reference in the unlikely event you are not asked so that another coach or player can educate the management about what you can realistically accomplish. When the coach or general manager is clear about how and under what circumstances you can be most effective, then a level of respect develops as a result.

Ultimately the consultant needs to gain the respect of both the coach and the general manager if any sort of long-term relationship is to develop. Since most professional baseball teams do not attach high priority to mental training, the coach is concerned with how the consultant will affect the team and the general manager is concerned about the cost of the program. The consultant must
be clear that the mental training program is one small part of the organization’s operation, even though we think it is a very important component.

The initial contact simply means that you have passed the credibility barrier. Over time, a clear understanding of the parameters under which you will work with a team becomes obvious. After 5 years of working with the same team, I have established some ground rules that govern the business relationship.

A number of important technical and substantive matters will strongly influence your effectiveness, and these issues must be resolved, preferably in some form of written agreement or contract prior to starting with the team. There are no hard and fast standards, and an issue that might be of great importance with one team may be of little significance to another. The following are important parameters that I resolve prior to working with a team:

1. Assess receptivity and awareness: Many professional baseball organizations do not have a clear idea what a mental training program is all about. Coaches and/or general managers usually make contact when they perceive a problem with their team; however, a good deal of education about what services you will or will not provide must be discussed at the outset. I clearly state that I will not do drug counseling, treatment of psychological problems, or participate in player selection. What I do offer is an educational program that illustrates the importance of mental skills in day-to-day play, teaches players and coaches to perform more consistently, and provides support for players in coping with the pressures of playing professional ball.

2. Modification of program structure: In the ideal situation, the organization recognizes that coaches, front office staff, scouts, and family members (significant others), as well as players, can benefit from mental skills training. Each of these groups exerts significant influence on players, and their support at critical junctures keeps the player on track during difficult times. At the same time, the wait for the ideal situation can last a very long time. It is important to determine at the outset if the context of the working environment prevents you from being effective. For example, I was brought in by the pitching coach to work with the team. The manager was willing to go along with my work with the pitchers but also issued a clear directive that I should not talk with position players. Obviously this was not an ideal situation, but I felt I could be effective with this particular group.

3. Support for program: Many players and coaches remain ignorant of the mental training program goals and confuse the effort to focus on improving the mental aspects of performance with psychiatrists. From my perspective, there must be clear, demonstrable support from both the general manager and the coach. Coaches must be willing to attend initial group sessions, encourage player participation, and make themselves accessible to the consultant. The general manager must define the level of service, including which minor league teams and major league players receive services after the season begins. In addition to these details that I work out at the beginning, a number of technical and procedural matters must be worked out, usually with the general manager.

4. Logistical: In order to tailor the program for a specific year, the consultant’s services are available throughout the entire season. In addition, if minor league teams are involved, scheduling must take place early in the season because most clubs have at least five minor league teams. As a consultant you must be persistent and not get frustrated by unreturned phone calls and the indecisiveness that accompanies consulting.
5. Evaluation: Ongoing feedback from players and coaching staff is essential to maintaining a long-term program. Most often, you begin working with a team without having the players involved in your selection. The organization makes the initial evaluation by checking your credentials with other baseball people, but ultimately it is the evaluation by the players and coaches that determines the longevity of your contract. It is assumed from the outset that you can motivate players and build interest in the program through group presentations and your individual work. Even with the players’ support, you must also continue to demonstrate the value of your services to the coach and general manager.

I use program feedback evaluation forms to provide me with information about players’ attitudes and understanding of the program. This allows me to revise my program to place more emphasis on areas where players are experiencing difficulty in their performance. In addition, the player and coach feedback evaluations provide a valuable information tool for management to summarize the impact of my program.

6. Referral process procedures: At the outset, I make it clear that the nature of my program is educational. I work out in advance, with the coach and/or general manager, how psychological problems that may surface during the season are referred to medical and/or psychology professionals.

Range and Organization of Services Provided

The format and setting for providing services differs greatly in professional baseball from the university and Olympic levels. At the college and Olympic level my time is usually divided equally between a group format with all or part of the team (i.e., position players, pitchers) and one-on-one interactions. At the professional level almost all of my work, after initial group meetings with players, is one on one. Similarly, I am most effective when I am invited to attend relevant portions of the coaches’ staff meetings. This approach facilitates group interaction, reinforces the development of mental training skills, and gives individual athletes and coaches access to a neutral third party to confide in and share their pains, joys, and personal issues.

At the professional level the environment is much more business oriented; there is less trust and less openness to new ideas. There are significant differences in how I implement mental skills training at the minor league level because several teams are involved and the players are more receptive to what I am saying, whether in a group setting or a one-on-one interaction. The division of my time at the minor league level is similar to how I operate at the college and Olympic level (i.e., half group presentation, half one on one). As a general rule there is much more emphasis on individual interactions at the major league level. Virtually all group meetings at the major league level occur during spring training.

Group Orientation to Mental Training

I start during spring training and spend 6 to 8 days on-site when all the teams come together. At the minor league level I will get a series of 1-hour time slots to discuss the rationale for a mental training skills program and presentations related to specific skills such as goal setting, self-regulation, concentration, and so forth. At the major league level I usually get several 30-minute group meetings during spring training with all or part of the team (pitchers separate from position
players) to discuss the mental training program. These group presentations provide me a foundation to work from when I meet with players on an individual basis to refine and develop their mental skills. In addition, it helps if the players understand how much their coaches value group meeting time. Thus, presentations to groups of players or the entire team is a clear sign that the coach and the organization support the program.

In group presentations to baseball players, I find that discussion is minimal and the questions infrequent. My initial goal with players is to present the information in a relevant, practical, nonthreatening manner. Once I am alone with the players who want to participate, they are not hesitant to be candid about their needs. Coaches and management realize that some of the players are not going to be receptive. If 50% actively participate, I feel I am doing well.

For the coaching staff, group meetings are usually confined to spring training. The primary emphasis is to provide information about the scope of a mental skills program. I focus on outcomes that are realistic as a result of mental training, provide methods that promote more effective interactions with players, and provide support for coaches related to their individual stressors. Since I began working with professional baseball in 1985, the entire professional baseball community has become much more receptive to mental skills training. These skills equip the player with specific mental skills to remain in control when he confronts adversity. It is essential in baseball to be consistent over the long season. The first step to consistent performance is coping with distractions so they do not interfere with the task at hand.

**Working With Individual Players in a Team Context**

After the group orientation has been completed, I focus on individual performance enhancement issues and work on confidence building, goal setting, consistency, stress management, time management, personal problems, and career goals after sport. My approach incorporates relaxation, imagery, self-talk monitoring, refocusing, concentration, and self-regulation training. Consistency is a key skill because many minor league ballplayers could play in the majors if they could handle all the distractions that interfere with performance. Thus, a major theme that runs throughout the mental skills training is learning how to play the game one pitch at a time on a daily basis (Ravizza, 1989).

I also function as a support person for players. A professional ballplayer is in an awkward position because it is difficult for him to share fears, worries, and insecurities with other players. Players compete with each other for a spot on the roster and there is a real fear that an individual player's vulnerabilities could be exploited. At the same time, the player's spouse and/or friends outside of the game do not understand the pressures of playing professional baseball. When a young player is drafted, family and friends expect he will eventually play at the big league level even though only a few make it.

I also try to help the player set long-range goals for life after sport in order to prepare for career termination. Young players strongly resist facing this issue but older players tend to be more receptive. This also helps solve the organization's problems in that the player is somewhat better prepared when he finds a cleaned-out locker if the issue of being sent down or career termination has already been discussed.

When I work with the major league players, I have a room in the stadium off the clubhouse where players can meet with me. The location is set up so no
one has to know they are seeing me. These are very proud young men and at first it may be difficult for them to seek help, let alone having their teammates see them do it. Once I begin working with the players, we do it at the stadium before the games. The nice thing about baseball is that there is a lot of “down” time; players arrive at 3:00 and start play at 7:30. I generally attend 2 or 3 days per 10-day home stand. Much of my work is then conducted on the phone when the players are on the road. This is an important aspect because players need to be constantly reminded about using mental skills training if they are going to integrate these into their daily performance. Players are encouraged to call me at any time. One objective indicator of effectiveness is when they call you. I also make personalized audio- and videotapes to facilitate imagery skills.

**Services to Individual Athletes**

Another area of service is consultation with individual players who seek out my services on their own, as many professional players reside in Southern California. Over the last 5 years I have been sought out by numerous professional baseball players who wanted to learn about or develop mental training skills on their own. For these situations, I work in the following manner: Initially I perform an assessment to determine individual needs. This consists of a lengthy background discussion and the player’s perceived needs. It is critical that I listen to the player and discover what he wants (Halliwell, 1989; Orlick, 1989). Thereafter, we develop an initial plan to meet his needs. At the end of this phase the player decides whether to continue further.

If the player thinks my consultation will be helpful, I ask for a three-session commitment. In this phase I provide basic information and the baseball player can practice various techniques in his training or in competitive situations. This commitment allows for formal closure to our work at the appropriate time. For those motivated professional baseball players who seek out my services on their own time, the scope of my assistance has ranged from providing the initial three sessions to 6 months, on a weekly basis. Several of these athletes have prompted their coaches to seek out my services or those of other sportpsych consultants to work with their organizations.

**Working With Coaches Individually**

For coaches, most of my individual interaction includes providing personal support and feedback from the players to the coach, obviously only with the player’s permission. This reinforces the group session I provide for the coaches in spring training. I also convey concepts and techniques related to effective communication with the players, media, and staff, giving performance feedback, goal setting, and further recognition of the player’s manifestations of stress.

In the early stages, a good portion of my work with coaches is done informally in the locker room, the hotel lobby, or at meals. As the relationship progresses, we set aside mutually convenient times for a formal meeting to discuss how individual players are performing and any issue they want to address.

**Specific Organization**

For the baseball organization that understands and supports an educationally based performance enhancement program, the place to begin with is the minor league system. The minor league players are much more receptive because they
are more open to trying new things in order to make it to the majors. In addition, being a minor league player is a lonely existence and there are many more factors over which the player has no control. There is additional economic pressure because the low salary makes it difficult to support a family. This tenuous environment definitely contributes to their receptiveness of mental training concepts.

The bulk of my work at this level takes place during spring training when all the minor league teams train together. I generally spend a total of 6 to 8 days on site. The first 2 days are spent in orientation with all the coaches during their pre-spring training sessions. I give a series of lectures and/or lead discussions on various aspects of mental training and coaching effectiveness. My presentations are integrated into the daily meeting schedule. This group orientation is critical because it educates the coaches and allows them to know what I am doing so we can integrate our approaches.

Once the players arrive at spring training, my day begins at 7:30 a.m. in the coaches' locker room. We discuss the day's plan and I get input from the coaches on specific players they want me to talk with. Once the morning practice begins, I am on the field or in the dugout, talking with players on an individual basis, assessing their needs, and tailoring the mental skills to meet their specific needs. In the afternoon on game days, I sit in the dugout talking with players between innings. Logistically, the down time in baseball works to the consultant's advantage. The players know they do not have to talk with me if they do not feel comfortable or if it is not an appropriate time. I tell them to feel free to just say "not now." Of course, I am sensitive to when is the best time to make contact.

At the end of the day I eat with the players (there are generally about 130 players in spring training), which really helps in gaining trust and rapport. This informal environment makes me accessible to many players who are hesitant to initiate a discussion or let me know that they have performance issues they wish to discuss. You must develop your own mechanisms that make it easy for players to talk. At the minor league level, I am more assertive in approaching the players than I am at the major league level.

In the evenings I give 1-hour lectures on the various mental skills, including concentration, confidence building, routines, and so forth. I work with the pitchers separate from the position players because their performance needs are so different. After spring training, all the players know how to contact me by phone during the season. In addition, I call each head coach on a regular basis to see if particular players need to be contacted. I cannot emphasize enough the need to check in routinely with coaches and players. One cannot assume that a player who is having performance difficulties will reach out for assistance. I like to visit each minor league club at least twice during the season, but the management may set a higher priority to work with the higher level minor league teams.

For minor league teams, I schedule 3 days on the road with each team. Ironically this is the most productive use of my time because most players sit around the hotel lobby killing time. At home, players are less accessible due to personal or family obligations. On the road my day begins with individual meetings with players and coaches. Then I go to the ballpark where I continue meeting with players before and during the game. After the games I meet with players informally at the hotel, in the bar, or just sitting around the pool.
Problems Encountered

From my perspective, there are two types of problems encountered by sportpsych consultants working at the professional level: those that can be resolved or alleviated and those that must be handled because they are simply a part of the professional baseball milieu. The first type of problem is primarily related to individual performance and/or communication issues between or among coaches and players. These are the everyday issues I love to deal with because after 15 years of working with individual athletes and teams, I get a great deal of satisfaction from helping an athlete manage his anxiety in pressure situations or giving a coach techniques that make him more effective with a particular player. This paper has explored a number of these obstacles, and it is my hope that some of the solutions will help others in difficult situations.

The more difficult problems to deal with are those that are inherent in professional baseball. There are three areas that have tested my coping skills and which are part of all professional sports: lack of playing experience at the professional level, player reluctance/fear of participating, and the transitory nature of professional sport.

I do not have any experience as a professional baseball player. While I have a solid understanding of the game, can identify performance problems, and have many years experience working with college and professional baseball teams, some players and even a few coaches will refuse to acknowledge that a nonbaseball person could have any useful input. When you encounter individuals who have closed minds on this topic, your best strategy is to remain patient and not get frustrated. It is important to realize that you cannot reach everyone.

Second, there may be some fear in the beginning, on the part of baseball players to be associated with mental training. Although every baseball player knows that mental mistakes cost the team games, some players are unwilling or unable to look at the reasons why their routines are no longer effective or why they always perform the same way in certain situations. Undoubtedly there are a host of psychological reasons why a substantial percentage of professional players refuse to seriously consider participating in a mental training program. As a consultant, you must accept that you will have limited effect on about one-third of the players. Nevertheless, players need support in making changes.

My work is to listen to their performance concerns, fears, insecurities, and insights, and I teach them the mental skills to cope more effectively with situations that are obstacles to performance. Over time, players recognize that my role is to be supportive of their efforts to apply mental skills to their baseball performance and that I also have a genuine interest in them as individuals outside of baseball. Of course this ideal is part of a process and certainly is not achieved with every player. Another third of players are uncertain about mental training interest, and the remaining one-third are seriously interested in the program. It is the group that is uncertain which presents the great challenge and greatest opportunity for the sportpsych consultant.

Finally, professional baseball is transitory in nature. During any given year, most teams have at least one significant change in management, coaching staff, or player personnel. Some teams have changes in all three areas. This inherent instability has a great impact on a mental training program because it is
not an essential service. While the printing, marketing, and sale of season tickets always gets priority regardless of personnel changes, a mental training program is more likely to be associated with a particular coach or management staff. When the coach or manager is "on the ropes," it is unrealistic to expect that much attention will be paid to the mental training program.

In this area your only solution is to continue doing what you do best. If the winds switch your way, you are back on the high road. If the commitment is lost, then you are "released," which gives you compassion for the players who have feelings of being constantly vulnerable.

Conclusion

In the 5 years I have been associated with professional baseball, I have seen increasing receptivity to the idea of an organized and sequential program for players related to the mental aspects of performance. Certainly some coaches are more comfortable with a traditional approach that typically responds to a particular player interaction, with little emphasis on a systematic development of mental skills. As I have emphasized, as a consultant you must work in and from the context you find yourself in. You must be clear of the ideal environment you would like to work in so that you can determine when the environment you are asked to work in is unacceptable. At the same time, you must modify your program to meet the unique situation and needs of coaches and players. There are political and practical qualities you must adjust to if your approach is to be effective.

At times, patience is essential and the consultant must wait for the teachable moment. Mental training programs are not a top priority for many coaches, so it is essential to integrate mental training concepts into performance related tasks and incorporate them into existing practice and performance procedures. Awareness of the importance of mental training programs occurs in stages, and baseball myths/beliefs are very slow to change due to the traditional nature of the game.

References


