THE MENTAL GAME:
Control of Emotions Is Essential
By KEN RAVIZZA

Baseball is a game which provides the obstacles of boredom and frustration. In order to maintain consistency, you must develop the ability to concentrate. When you are on top of your game, your mental skills are right there. You don't even have to think about it. It just happens. But there are some days where you have to constantly adjust and compensate. Learning to cope effectively with the difficult days is one of the factors that makes the difference between making the big leagues and remaining in the minors.

So often coaches claim the game is 70 percent mental and 30 percent physical, but how much of the players' training involves the mental aspects? The mental skills are not magical. They can be developed with practice. The player must first become aware of how pressure affects him personally. This awareness provides an important understanding: that will help the player gain control. The player must learn to control his emotional self before he tries to control the performance. It's only by being in control of yourself that you can make the adjustments in your performance to meet the demands of the situation. The development of psychological skills can contribute to an athlete's consistent performance by learning to regulate one's stress level so he can focus the attention appropriately on the task at hand. The psychological skills are tools that can be used to "concentrate", "relax", or "psych up" on those days when you are not on top of your game, i.e., those games when you are battling sickness, recovering from long periods of travel or coming back from injuries.

Just like physical skills, mental skills need to be practiced. A player must practice to learn to hit a curve ball, and the ability to concentrate must also be practiced. You may have to
try them numerous times in order to develop specific techniques that work for you. The best place to develop them is in practice. You must learn to recognize stressful situations during practice and develop methods to handle them in practice. For example, when you make an error, develop a strategy to acknowledge your frustration; let it go, regroup and focus on the next play. This sounds easy, but when the game is on the line, it is a real challenge since it appears that your world is falling in around you. Things may appear speeded up, the ball looks smaller to the hitter and very heavy to the pitcher. For this reason, it is essential to practice the skills in practice so you have confidence in them when the pressure is on. Anytime in practice when your mind wanders or you have to deal with adversity are good opportunities to work on your mental skills.

The psychological skills are used to regulate yourself so you can increase your chances for success by being fully focused on the task at hand. This ability to direct your attention where you want is an essential skill. As a player, you do not have control of many of the situations you find yourself in (i.e. a bad hop, the politics of the team) but you can control the way you choose to respond to the situation.

The overall goal of mental training is to have as much of your attention as possible focused on the task at hand. This increases your chances for success. It is unrealistic to think that you are going to have 100 percent of your energy focused on every ball game over you long season. For example, there may be games where you have minor aches and pains, problems in your personal life, etc. It is important to note that whatever amount of energy you have on a given night, you are able to totally direct that amount of energy which is needed to get the job done.

Know Yourself
In order to gain control, it is essential that you know yourself. You must know your strengths and weaknesses. How aroused do you need to be to perform well? What types of situations do you view as stressful? How do you talk to yourself during performance? Where do you experience tension in your body, and how does this affect your thoughts on performance? This understanding is important so that you are not surprised by your stress reactions but are prepared to deal with them appropriately. Your awareness helps you learn to control your stress level by knowing your stress signals: butterflies, self-doubts, shoulder tension and negative self talk.

The player must learn to accept these feelings and let them function as signals to the level of his emotional state. Thus you can recognize that tension is your way of telling you that you need attention. The stress signals let you know what you need to do to adjust and reach that ideal emotional level to perform to your potential.

**Awareness of Managing Stress:**

Knowing yourself requires that you become aware of what you are doing. Players must have an ability to stay within themselves and not "over press." For example, when pitchers begin having difficulties, they have a tendency to "bear down" and "muscle" the ball. This often results in less movement on the ball and becomes a higher pitch since the motion, isn't as fluid. The pitcher has to stay within himself in order to exert only the right amount of effort on the ball to keep it moving. It is crucial to develop your awareness in order to monitor yourself appropriately and adjust as needed. Awareness is the first step toward gaining control. You must learn where you are before you can attempt to make any adjustments. As a professional player your awareness also helps you make the constant adjustments in technique that are required. As you become aware, you gain more knowledge of what situations get you uptight,
and you learn to monitor your arousal level. Are you up enough for your performance? Are you too “keyed up”? You must become aware of your ideal arousal level for various performance tasks and develop a variety of methods to adjust it as needed.

**Consistency**

Players are often told that they need to MATURE. Depending on the individual, this may mean developing certain skills, i.e., a new pitch, more break on the curve. But often the major issue is becoming more consistent with your play. Any minor leaguer on a great day can perform in the big leagues, but the goal is to become more consistent within the performance. Much of my work the past years has focused on this aspect of sport performance. The game of baseball requires consistency due to the length of the season, the adjustments that must be made to the environmental factors, playing fields, weather factors, and the adjustments to the wear and tear which the body endures. A professional ball player is just supposed to learn to deal with these factors. It is my belief that we can help players move along faster in reaching these goals. This ability can be developed just like physical skills.

Consistency so often is worked on only with the actual physical mechanics of the performance. The approach that I will present addresses consistency in five stages: game day preparation, warm up, pre-performance, performance and performance evaluation. Consistency is based on finding that centered point where one is mentally and physically focused on the task at hand. This means you have techniques to clear out any disturbances and focus on the task at hand. Centering is a key concept that I use throughout the mental preparation and actual performance.

**Game Day Preparation**
Each player has his things he must do to prepare for a game. I have found that when athletes are struggling, they think about their performance continuously on game day. This drains the player of vital energy. I want to emphasize that this isn’t “bad” if the player performs well. However, for most players the grind of a long season and the constant worry negatively effects performance as evidenced by lack of intensity, not concentrating, and pressing too much. For this reason, having a set time before going to the ballpark to mentally prepare for the game with the purpose of establishing set goals for the game is essential. You have specific goals for each game. I recommend at least 15 minutes for this phase. The use of relaxation and imagery skills can be used to mentally prepare for the game. This involves the player lying down and going through systematic relaxation. The goal is to clear the mind of the stresses and strains of the day such as feelings of loneliness, missing loved ones, etc. and then begin to direct the attention on the game. This is where specific performance goals for the game are established, and this is followed by seeing yourself play the kind of game you want. It is important that this is done in a relaxed place so that you can really focus your attention on it. I do not want you to mistake this process with thinking about the game as you drive to the ballpark. The method that I am proposing is more structured.

After imagery, the next component of mental preparation is getting dressed. As a player puts on his uniform, he is literally putting on the ultimate ball player. The attention begins to shift from daily events to the game.

Warm-Up

Baseball has set warm-up procedures. These procedures are established to set the pace for the game. The first stage is to check the actual field one is playing on. For pitchers, determine what the mound is like. For outfielders, what is the warning track like. The purpose
is to eliminate any surprises or potential problems that the field may present. After checking out
the field, a focal point should be selected in the stadium. This focal point is something that is
stationary and part of the field, for example, the 360 foot sign. This sign will be the same now as
when the stadium is full and the scouts are watching. When the pressure is on and your heart
beat is up to 100 beats a minute, the focal point is a positive reminder that you have paid you
dues, worked hard and trained hard. It is as if this focal point is a positive reminder that you are
awesome. It also reminds you to get your emotional level where it needs to be. Either increase it
or decrease it as needed.

The focal point is something that you can go to when “the garbage is hitting the fan” and
that little voice says “you need to calm down.” Many athletes recognize what they need to do to
adjust but they just keep telling themselves to relax. It is helpful if the player has something he
can physically do to relax. Thus, when a player recognizes the need to relax, it should be
followed with a technique that results in feeling relaxed. For example, focusing on regulating
the breathing through taking a few good breaths.

At this point, the warm-up involves the stretching exercises that you go through to feel
where your body is on this given day and adjust it as needed through stretching it to that
balanced position. I often see players have difficulty finding rhythm because tension is in the
body part that they did not stretch out. Once the body is stretched, the player now can focus on
performance and to gradually feel that centered point in the performance. This means the pitcher
in warming up begins by just softly throwing. After the arm is warmed up, he throws hard to air
the arm out, and then he throws to specific locations to fine tune his mental concentration. After
this is achieved, the pitcher begins to work on his variety of pitches and reaches that point of the
right velocity and control. This is a process where one’s awareness is critical.
Pre-Performance Routine

After the warm-up, the pre-performance routine is the next thing that must be developed. In order to concentrate appropriately, the athlete must keep his attention on the task at hand. Stress levels increase when we worry about past mistakes or press too much on future performance. For example, a good hitter is not going to get a hit seven out of 10 times. All of the stress is a result of focusing on not getting a hit. When a player is on deck, he doesn't need to get a hit. But he does need to stretch out, get a feel for his swing, anticipate the situation and observe the pitcher. The key is to focus on those things you have control over. Next, walk to the plate under control and don't rush. At this point take your time smoothing out the dirt in the batters box so that you are comfortable. Your attention should be on smoothing out the box and not on getting a hit. Next, take your sign, and before you step in the box, take a nice breath. This will let you know that you have control over yourself.

Sometimes players press so much that they can't take a nice deep breath. At this point step in the box really focusing on your body position and establish that solid, graceful rhythm with your swing. After you are balanced within, direct your attention to the release point of the pitcher and react to the pitcher with the goal of making contact. Thus the first step is to control yourself by doing those things you always do before you hit. But, do them with awareness and concentration. Once you have control of yourself and you are fully focused on the pitch, the next step is to make solid contact. By being in total control of yourself and making solid contact, the hits will come. I believe the frustration gets greater and greater if the player only thinks of the end result of getting a hit.

In summary, your college experience gives you an opportunity to develop both the physical and mental skills of your game, as you become more aware of the pressures you must
face, and the way that you experience the pressure, you can begin to control yourself in more productive ways. Once you learn to manage the stress of the game you can then develop techniques to mentally prepare for games, to handle pressure situations, and to really enjoy playing the game.