THE MENTAL GAME
Control Of Emotions Is Essential

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MENTAL TRAINING/PART II

Control Of Emotions Is Essential

By KEN RAVIZZA
Sportspsych Consultant
Cal. State Fullerton Univ.

FULLERTON, Calif. — 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

SWEATING UNDER PRESSURE — Through mental training, hands can be programmed to stop sweating during high stress situations. Such training is valuable to baseball players because of the pressure situations they endure.

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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 you mind wander 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 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 except 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 "mush" 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 an 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 is often 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.
CB: You mentioned the word focused in your analysis of what baseball players must be. I hear that term constantly by Olympic athletes. What does focused mean?

RAVIZZA: There are two main principles concerned here. As a baseball player you don’t have control of what is going on around you. You only have control in how you choose to respond to it. Next, you’ve got to be in control of yourself before you control the performance. When you’re in a groove as a pitcher, everything we are talking about happens pretty much automatically. Baseball is a game where you must be consistent over a period of time. We earlier talked about the physiological reactions to the stress, but there is a behavioral reaction also. You start speeding up and then slowing down. You get upset with teammates and withdraw from the group. Those are reactions to the stress as well. Our thoughts become affected. We get critical and judgmental of ourselves. Then you argue with umpires questioning whether they can see properly. That is when athletes is over the edge and too keyed up. That is what I mean when I talk about the player being in control of himself. Once you are in control, the issue is being focused on the task at hand. Let me give you an example. In working with the Nebraska football team, we have a concept of taking one play at a time. You hear them talk about that all the time. In baseball you hear about taking the play at a time. That takes intense concentration. What we do at Nebraska is the play is executed and the whistle blows. At that point the player must review and process what happened on that play. He must recognize the early keyed up or too loose. If he is too keyed up, then he must let that play go. Then he must regroup and pull the sternum up. And I talk about that a lot. When you are recovering from mistakes, don’t try to perform better. Instead, get control of yourself and pull the sternum up. Get the chest up and stand tall. Next, we get back to the huddle and regroup. The quarterback steps up in the says “ready”. That is the key to focus in at that specific moment. The only thing the player has to do at that moment is get the play and the snap count. I don’t have to perform better. Next I break from the huddle. I take a breath which helps me over to automatic pilot. I am trusting my ability and reacting. I am essentially eliminating the thought process. Now I am ready to go. I respond. The whistle blows and the cycle starts over again.

CB: How does this apply to baseball?

RAVIZZA: It’s the same thing in baseball. The pitcher throws the pitch, and he gets instant feedback as to where the pitch was. The umpire might have a high strike zone. The breaking ball isn’t working well. The pitcher has to think about the situation a little bit. I know we say don’t think. But there comes a point in time when you have to deliver a pitch to make the adjustment. I see performance as being adjustment. There is no such thing as perfection. You are constantly adjusting all the time and compensating. Now I am aware that the strike zone is this and I have to stay on top of my breaking ball. I might find myself getting upset with the umpire, and I need to release that feeling. At this point I may spit, pick up some dirt, throw it down and then pull my sternum up and turn around. Some pitchers don’t turn around. They walk backwards and then come forward. When you walk backwards and need to be negative, fine. But when you come forward, you must be positive. Now you’ve recognized the problem, regrouped and am ready. The pitcher puts his foot on the rubber where he’s ready. Ready means right here, right now, this pitch and totally focused in. You can go to many baseball games and see the pitcher on the rubber shaking his head in disbelief over the last call by the plate umpire. Or you have a catcher out there who keeps calling a strike and the pitcher is not committed to the pitch. So I believe when you step on the rubber, you should be ready to pitch. For hitters when you step in the box, you are ready. I know that sounds very simple and it is. But when the pitcher is hitting the fan, it’s got to be simple. Then the issue is you are ready and focus in. The thing I keep on stressing over and over again is focusing in by athletes. Do not block out.
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 affects 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 your 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 turn 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, he 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 getting hits. 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
CB: You rarely hear of coaches practicing routines such as this in practice.
RAVIZZA: We even go to the extent of practicing errors. For instance, we have the shortstop practice making an error. He needs to turn around after throwing the ball and be extremely upset. It’s nice to take the cybernetics approach and be positive. But that just doesn’t happen. You have got to give the athlete an opportunity to be upset. But then he has to let go of those feelings. We do dry runs with this drill. We have the shortstop or other position player pretend he has made an error or bobbled the ball. Then he picks up some dirt and throws it down or reacts naturally. But then he lets go. All the player is doing is what he does all through the season but we are bringing awareness to it.
CB: How do you get control of your senses during high pressure situations? To me that is the whole key of mental conditioning.
RAVIZZA: Here is the progression I use. First, the athlete must learn to relax. We train him in a systemic way to learn how to relax. Then he must be able to relax with distractions. I will come in and possibly have a tape of crowds cheering. I did this with the 1984 Cal. St.-Fullerton team. The players must actually start to see that mental skills, as physical, can be learned. There is no magic involved here. Then we carry this out to a standing position. We want the player at this point to be centered and be in charge of his breathing. Is the sort of the situation where the player doesn’t have control of what is going on around him, but he does have control on how he chooses to respond to it. Now you have to be centered and balanced in your routine. You must be consistent in the time you get the ball from the catcher, putting your foot on the pitching rubber, and throwing the next pitch. I think the one sport we really see this is in golf. If a person hits a good shot, he is walking one pace to the ball. If he hits a bad shot, then that person is marching like a storm trooper. Then they get over the ball and their pulse rate is probably 20 beats more a minute and they’re wondering why they feel weird. When I work with golfers, I do a lot of work with walking. What they do between the shots is where they sabotage themselves. The issue becomes one of quality practice time. I try to get the athlete to work on this stuff not only in game situations but in practice. When they make the error in practice, turn it around. Here we go. Work with it there so you get more and more confidence.

CB: If you practice these techniques you are talking about every day, is that how you maintain consistency over the long season?
RAVIZZA: You got it. The issue becomes one of what you do in practice. You have paid your dues. So often the athlete’s energy is on the big game. The big game isn’t where it is at. It’s trusting yourself. It’s paying the dues on a day to day basis.
CB: You are a big advocate of focused catch. Can you explain how you do this?
RAVIZZA: We take a basic skill like throwing. But what we now do is bring awareness into it. We are not just throwing. But we are throwing to specific spots. This gives the coach feedback on who’s here and who isn’t. We might have the player throw to the left shoulder, sternum, right shoulder, left hip, bellybutton, right hip. So you start to see behavior develop. Augie Garrido is great at this. He can start to see things before the play develops. He can see the player pressing with his pre-performance routine. And he normally says something to the kid before the kid goes up to the plate and wastes two pitches. There is the old cliché that coaches use: “When you come out here, you’re got to be into baseball.” What we are doing by developing this focused catch awareness is checking out who’s here today. Granted, they are there physically. But very often at practice what are the players talking about? They are talking about girls, parties and so forth. They are not there mentally. You are bringing a basic skill that you do every time you day and day out and bring awareness to it. This is why I think the basics are so important. If you explain why the basics are good for you and least at that. When the garbage hits the fan, that’s what you need to go to. You don’t need to go to performing better. Because all that does is create

CB: How long do you perform focused catch during practice?
RAVIZZA: The ideal time is about 10 minutes every day in practice. But I remember the first time we did it at Fullerton under Augie. We spent 90 minutes the first time because the guys were talking about girls. They weren’t doing it. He just sat there until the players did it. And it took 90 minutes. I try to work with teams to have mental training incorporated into their practices. We want the players to become more conscious of it. The coaches don’t have a lot of time to spend on this sort of stuff. So you have to incorporate it into the existing practice. Coaches love to hear about quality practice time.
CB: How does a player develop the complete awareness that you advocate an athlete having?
RAVIZZA: Awareness is a tool to help the athlete perform to the peak level. When it comes to the peak level, the athlete is not thinking at all. He is just seeing the ball and reacting. I want to make sure that is clear. Just react. But there is a lot of preparation you have to go through to be able to react. For example to stay within yourself, you must know what that means to do that. One of the ways we do that is instead of only telling the athlete how to do things, for example telling the pitcher to raise his shoulder constantly. You repeat this over and over again. Don’t you think the kid knows he is supposed to raise his shoulder? The issue becomes he doesn’t have any awareness that his shoulder is locked. So you as a coach put the shoulder in certain positions by touch teaching in five different locations. The proper shoulder position can be a five while extremely low is a one. After each pitch where is your shoulder? Have the pitcher respond. Was it a two, four, three? Have him experience and feel where each of these locations are. One of the problems with this system is that it takes a little more time. But the kid is feeling it and that is important. That is one of the things that Augie is a master at. He asks questions instead of telling the players what to do. Good coaches tend to do that.
CB: Is there anything else you would like to add?
RAVIZZA: The key is getting it to the point where you are in control of yourselves enough so that you can let go and trust yourself and just do it. When I talk to athletes who are really performing well, they are just feeling it.

Ken Ravizza, a sportspych consultant, teaches in the health and physical education department at Cal. St.-Fullerton. Ravizza can be contacted by writing him at 233 S. Irena Ave., Redondo Beach, Calif. 90277 or call (213) 316-1396 at his home. At work he can be reached at (714) 773-3318.