Ravizza Explains How To: Gain Self Control In Tough Baseball Game Situations

In order to play the game one pitch at a time, athletes must be in total control of themselves.

By KEN RAVIZZA

FULLERTON, CA - It is the top of the ninth, the score is 3-2, and the pitcher is trying to protect his lead. The first man gets a "bleeder" infield hit and the next hitter hits a double play ball to the shortstop, but he makes an error, so now there are no outs and two men on. The pitcher now begins to "bear down" in order to get out of the inning. As he tries harder, his ball comes up in the strike zone, and he falls behind in the count.

He begins to work faster and tries to throw even harder. The pitcher is now out of control and the manager is on his way out to the mound to bring in another pitcher. This scenario happens all the time. A pitcher is doing fine and then he begins to press and he speeds up, stops trusting himself and begins spinning out of control. His mindset of taking it "one pitch at a time" is gone.

He is no longer focused on WHAT IS, which is the next pitch, but he is focused on WHAT IF, which are all the outcomes that could occur if he doesn't make this pitch. His focus of attention which was locked on the target, has shifted to seeing the hitter, who is on deck, even the manager's facial expressions, as well as who is warming up in the bullpen.

This type of focus makes it difficult to hit the target. In the book Heads Up Baseball, Tom Hanson and I emphasize the importance of playing the game "one pitch at a time." This concept is like a Zen riddle in that it sounds so simple, but at times it is so difficult to do. This is especially true when the adversity builds or "the garbage hits the fan." In order to play the game
"one pitch at a time" the player must be in control of himself. He must have a plan and truly commit to the plan for that pitch or that at bat. The final component is to trust himself in executing the performance, or as hitters say "just see the ball and hit the ball." This aspect of trust requires that the player be in control of himself so that he can think clearly, commit to the plan, and then let go of self-control so he can become totally connected with the task at hand and just trust himself.

In this article, I am going to focus on the first step of one pitch at a time and that is the issue of self-control.

**Gaining Self-Control.**

One of the things I am always talking to players about is the need to be in control of yourself before you control your performance. As Howie Gershberg, minor league pitching coach with the Anaheim Angels often says, "Self-control leads to body control which leads to ball or bat control." If the player is out of control emotionally, then this inappropriate emotion will manifest itself in his mechanics.

The weakest part of the mechanics will break down. As coaches, we want to "fix the problem" with mechanics.

But if the player can perform when there is not pressure, than it is obvious he knows the mechanics.

If the player can NOT perform in batting practice or in the bullpen, then the issue is not a mental game issue. The player needs to do some work.

**Sphincter-Cranial Tendon:**

After all my years of work on the Mental side of the game, I discovered an explanation for this type of reaction to pressure and it is an imaginary "tendon" in the human body that runs
from the sphincter muscle, through the buttocks to the cranium or brain. When the sphincter muscle tightens there is a direct connection to the brain and the brain tightens up and gets involved in inappropriate thinking when a pitcher confronts adversity.

This results in the pitcher working harder and faster, instead of stepping off, catching his breath, committing to the next pitch, and trusting his stuff. The player forgets all the hours of preparation and his ability to execute proper mechanics. Instead, he presses and either begins to perform with a "primal" all out approach. He is apt to forget that at times in performance, "trying less is more."

Other athletes begin to doubt themselves and assume that their opponent has his stuff all together which is often another mistake. When this lack of confidence occurs, a player may attempt to execute the "perfect" performance which causes him to get too fine with his pitches or too absorbed with the mechanics of his swing as a hitter.

Learning Mental Skills

There are three major things an athlete has to do from a mental game perspective to stay in control. I want to emphasize that these three tasks only complement the traditional conditioning and mechanical things the player is already doing.

First he has to increase his awareness so he can RECOGNIZE when his thoughts and emotions are pulling him down the ineffective path. Second he has to RELEASE and let go of the negatives and/or the last pitch, and he has to get to the present moment.

The third thing he needs to do is to REGROUP and get centered and balanced and be ready when he puts his foot on the rubber or steps in the batter's box. What does it mean to be ready? The time is now, the place is here and the attitude is "I own this rubber" or "this is my batter's box."
This type of self-control can only help the player or as Skip Bertman the 1996 Olympic team coach constantly told his team, "Your responsibility is to give yourself the best opportunity for success and this is baseball so there are no guarantees you will get your results."

Traffic Control.

I compare athletic performance driving a car. When you are driving a car and you come to a signal light you must "check in" and observe the light. If the light is green, then go. If the light is yellow; than you have to become more conscious of what is happening in the intersection and make a decision if you are going to proceed. If the light is red, then you need to stop. An athlete needs to "check in" at the appropriate times, and learn what his signal lights are. What do you experience when the lights are yellow?

What are the warning signs for you? What are your thoughts? What happens to your focus'? For example, one pitcher said "A yellow light for me is when I start working faster and my ball comes up in the strike zone."

Another player said "A yellow light for me is when I have negative self talk."

"A red light is when I believe the negative self talk." Coach Dave Snow, Long Beach State stated "the signal lights give us a vocabulary to address the players' excitement level and help the player increase his awareness of being in control."

Flush It

Once the player confronts a yellow or red light he must RELEASE the negative self talk, unnecessary muscle tension, or whatever manifestations he has that are interfering with his performance. Almost five years ago I emphasized this point by using a small toilet bank, that actually makes a flushing sound. This symbol is perfect for me since my father was a plumber. But I believe the toilet functions as a symbol to "let it go." It serves as a reminder.
I also like the toilet concept because it encourages the players to laugh and the humor is beneficial because it helps the player keep things in perspective.

I first used the toilet in 1995 with the Long Beach State and Cal State Fullerton teams. The symbol worked so well that Skip Bertman incorporated it with the 1996 Olympic Team and his teams at L.S.U. Coach Bertman stated, “The toilet allows the player to know there are times when he will be out of control, but the toilet reminds him to not hang onto it and let it go and get to the next pitch.”

Dave Snow claimed “It is a symbol that serves as a reminder to flush or release that last pitch, last at bat, or last inning and focus on the task at hand.”

A more subtle example of this is when a pitcher gets squeezed on the first hitter of the inning and proceeds to get out of the inning with no runs being scored.

But when he gets to the dugout he is complaining about getting squeezed with the first hitter. If he is still thinking about it, he never released it and this type of subtle self-imposed distraction may catch up with him later.

I think a key concept that coaches understand is that peak performance is about compensating and adjusting, not about being perfect. When the athlete understands this, it is easier for him to bounce back from adversity, because he realizes this is part of the process of playing this sometimes difficult game.

**Routine: Center One's Self**

Once the athlete takes care of “traffic-control” and flushes the negatives, he now is prepared to reconnect with his performance routine which is used to help him funnel his energies on the task at hand. But the player must be centered and balanced so that he can think
clearly. A practical example would be a hitter who takes a bad swing at a pitch, and realizes he now has a yellow light going on.

He recognizes he is not where he needs to be, so he steps out of the box and flushes the negative swing. He may unsnap his hitting gloves to flush it, he may tap his spikes, or he may walk to a space close to the box where he has his imaginary toilet. He acknowledges and “lets go” of the negative.

He may take a good practice swing (so he puts a positive in his muscle memory; we see golfers do this all the time after a bad swing). He now is in control, and uses his pre at-bat routine to gradually funnel himself into the next pitch. Dave Snow once summarized what I was saying by stating, “You have to be where you need to be when you need to be there.”

When the next pitch begins the player needs to be totally focused on that pitch, but between pitches the game gives you time to recognize your signal lights, flush the negatives, regroup, and focus on the next pitch. The player does not have to be totally focused all the time, but he does need to be locked in at the appropriate time. I want to conclude this article by emphasizing the importance of using symbols as a means to foster awareness.

Since baseball is a game of adjustments, the player must realize there will be times when he makes mistakes, is surprised by a pitch, or the pitcher makes a great pitch and the hitter hits it. The key is that the player did not. beat himself and he regrouped to give himself the best opportunity for success.