CHAPTER 10

Issues for the Sport Psychology Professional in Baseball

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Abstract

Two consultants share their perspectives and experiences serving as sport psychology professionals in baseball. Topics include the principal objectives of their work (long-term excellent performance, self-adjustment, and consistency); a review of key elements of baseball and baseball culture that affect consultants; the vital role of building relationships, credibility, and trust; and common issues they discuss with players. The role of consultants' authenticity is emphasized, as is the importance of linking the mental game and physical game, "getting" a player, making distinctions, and helping players develop self-control. The authors list common errors in thinking that players make and offer their thoughts on how consultants can get started working in baseball.

Baseball players typically report that 80% or more of their performance is determined by mental and emotional factors. Although some players, particularly younger ones, need to be convinced that their mind plays a critical role in how well they play, most realize that their own thought processes largely determine how well they perform. Coaches are well versed in the technical and strategic aspects of the game, but few possess the knowledge and methods to teach confidence, focus, and consistency directly. As a result, the players' psychological and emotional development is left largely to chance.

Our task as sport psychology professionals is to educate players and coaches on the fundamentals of the mental game and provide a structure of support for them as they develop their abilities to use their thoughts and emotions to their best advantage. Long Beach State Head Coach Dave Snow commented that "incorporating the mental game into my coaching has provided me with a vocabulary to address one of the most important aspects of baseball" (personal communication, September 1996).
Coaches must consider not only the technical aspects of the game, but also what most players realize—that performance is affected by thoughts and emotions.

In this chapter we share what we have learned as sport psychology professionals working in baseball, including

1. Our principal objectives;
2. The importance of understanding the nature of baseball;
3. The building of relationships, credibility, and trust; and
4. Common issues we address with players.

Objectives of Our Approach

As sport psychology professionals we (a) provide information, (b) teach skills, and (c) support players and coaches in refining and developing their mental approach to the game (Ravizza, 1990). We have three general objectives in our work.

Long-Term Excellent Performance

Our approach is educational, designed to facilitate long-term top performance. Like physical skills, the perspectives and skills we offer players are devel-
oped over time. It takes consistent practice over a prolonged period of time for a pitcher to learn to throw a slider, and it takes consistent practice over a prolonged period of time for a player to learn to control his focus. The player's reward for doing the work in both cases is knowing he gave himself his best chance for success.

We take great strides to get players and coaches to understand that we are not "shrinks" to be conferred with only when a player needs to be "fixed." In professional baseball, each team has an employee assistance program that provides counseling services for players and coaches. We refer players to counselors when that is appropriate, but distinguish ourselves as being focused on enhancing performance rather than resolving psychological problems.

Self-Adjustment

Baseball is a game of adjustments, and players need to learn to make adjustments on their own. We want players to develop the ability to recognize when they are not in control of themselves and to have the ability to regain their composure and focus. We want players to be able to realize for themselves when they are too focused on statistics or are not being themselves on the field. The skilled batter makes an adjustment during or between at-bats, whereas the less skilled may give away a game or a whole week's worth of at-bats before making an adjustment.

Consistency, or Making Bad Days Less Bad and Less Frequent

Working on the mental game is not about players being in the "zone" all the time. Often, once a player has developed his mental game, he will find that he is simply more consistent and that the days he plays poorly are not as bad. He begins to report having "good bad days."

The Nature of Baseball

One of the keys to successful consulting in baseball is understanding the nature of the game and the unique challenges it presents. The fundamental elements of top human performance, such as motivation, confidence, focus, and mental preparation, are as critical in baseball as they are in any other per-
formance domain, but it is important to have a firm grasp on the unique combination of factors that make the game so mentally challenging.

The rules of baseball (such as requiring batters to hit a round ball with a round bat, putting nine players out on defense, and forcing pitchers to throw the ball over the plate) are made with the express purpose of making things difficult. The originators of baseball established rules that make it difficult to achieve the results the players want. Part of the enjoyment of the game is overcoming these obstacles.

One of the biggest obstacles for the skilled player is himself—his own thinking and the way he responds internally to the external obstacles the game presents. Our work with the mental game focuses on helping players and coaches overcome the obstacles they put in their own way, including fear, doubt, anxiety, and lack of focus. We help players get out of their own way. The goal is to help the player arm himself with the mind-set and skills he needs to free himself to engage with the external obstacles, with minimal hindrance from himself (Hanson, 1991; Ravizza & Hanson, 1995).

The following section reviews some of the principal aspects of baseball that give rise to the issues most commonly encountered by sport psychology professionals.

**Results Are Not Within Players' Control**

Success in baseball is usually measured in wins and losses, hits and outs, putouts and errors, but because of the way the game is designed, players fail constantly. Hitting is the most obvious mental challenge: If the batter keeps his failure rate down to 70%, he is a great hitter. Given that professional players play nearly every day, and college players play several days each week, they usually do not have long after a great performance before they fail in the next one. The sentiment is often that a player is only as good as his last performance.

Players often experience frustration because many of the factors that determine their success are outside their control. They can do everything "right" and still fail. The pitcher can watch his best pitch fly over the outfield fence or be called a ball by the umpire. The hitter can hit a ball perfectly and be out before he has a chance to take a step toward first base. A team can be totally focused, play great, but still be beaten by an inferior team because the breaks just went their way. So day after day, month after month, players have to deal with not being able to control whether they achieve the results they
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want to achieve. Getting players to recognize and accept what they can and cannot control is one of the keys to successfully working in baseball (Dorfman & Kuehl, 1989; Ravizza & Hanson, 1995).

The Players Have Time to Think

Time is another major issue. Players and coaches invest an enormous amount of time in the game. First, baseball players spend many hours at the ballpark. Professional players often get to the field at 2 p.m. for a 7:30 p.m. game, play for 3 hours, then take another hour to shower and clean up before they leave. College players usually spend slightly less time on the field, but still rarely get to the park less than 2 hours before game time. Half the games are on the road, so travel time adds up, and in some pro leagues, players endure 14-hour bus rides.

The routine at the ballpark can become monotonous: Get dressed, stretch out, take batting practice, and wait for the game to start. This cycle is done day after day for six months. Players can easily slip into a "cruise control" mentality and simply put in their time. Players often "go through the motions" of practicing without being mentally and emotionally engaged in what they are doing. As a result, they often lack the intensity and purpose needed to develop their skills and play their best baseball. Enhancing the quality of practice time must be one of the main goals of the mental training program.

No clock is used in baseball, so the game itself takes a long time. The time between pitches can be helpful for a player, but it is often used poorly. Boredom is a major issue. Both before and during the game, the relative lack of action provides ample opportunities for the mind to drift to other interests or concerns. Because of the amount of failure the players experience, it is common for a player to spend much of the time between pitches dwelling on past failures and criticizing himself for a poor performance. He may also spend time between pitches worrying about future pitches. This creates a mind-set that jeopardizes the quality of upcoming performances. Much of the work we do as sport psychology consultants in the mental game focuses primarily on how to best use the time between pitches.

In short, baseball players have an enormous amount of time to think about their performance before, during, and after a game. A player's success in baseball is heavily influenced by what he chooses to focus on during those times.
Baseball Is a Game of Adjustments

Because of the difficulty of the game, the long season of playing every day, and the length and nature of the games, baseball is a game of adjustments. Rarely does a player feel 100% physically or mentally. The long hours and sudden spurts of vigorous activity during the games result in fatigue, soreness, and nagging injuries, so players must constantly adjust to how they feel physically; the challenges of the game (and of life) also force players to constantly adjust to how they feel emotionally.

Baseball is a complex game requiring refined mental and emotional skills, so another challenge is getting to the emotional and psychological state that optimizes performance. Baseball is a marathon consisting of hundreds of short sprints. A high degree of skill is needed to play the game, and the games take hours to play, which suggests that a low level of arousal would generally be most effective; but baseball also requires periodic bursts of high-intensity action, so there are times when a high level of arousal is best (Weinberg & Gould, 1999). Each individual differs as to what arousal level he performs best at, and each position has slightly different demands.

Finally, the game situation changes with each of the approximately 240 pitches thrown. The score, the inning, the weather, the position of the batter in the lineup, where a batter hit the ball the last time up, how the batter looked on the last swing he took, what the batter did against this pitcher two weeks ago, whether the pitcher is getting his breaking ball over for strikes, and the position of runners on base are just some of the variables that must be considered before deciding on a plan for the next pitch. Pitcher Jim Abbott stated that "pitching is like crossing a river, you never can cross the same one twice. The river is always changing like the game is always changing" (personal communication, January 14, 1992).

The ability to think clearly between pitches is critical. If a player's mind is racing from the stress or fear of the situation, he will be unable to make the adjustments the game requires. As Long Beach State Head Coach Dave Snow says, "Working on the mental game is about helping players get where they need to be when they need to be there." This may sound simple, but it is extremely difficult to do in the midst of performance.

Baseball Is an Individual Sport Played in a Team Context

More than most team sports, baseball is individual in nature. The hitter stands alone against the entire opposing team. The third baseman cannot get help on
a ball hit sharply down the line. The pitcher is responsible for setting the pace of the game. Add the enormous emphasis placed on statistics in baseball, and there is no hiding. Baseball forces players to "stand naked before the gods" (Metheny, 1969, p. 69).

Future Hall of Famer Wade Boggs said, "This is a team sport made up of nine individuals. No one is going to throw a block for me or set a pick for me or give me an assist when I step into that batter's box to try to help the club" (qtd. in Williamson, 1999a). In other words, as some professional athletes state: "There is no 'I' in the word team, but there is an 'm' and an 'e.'" This is particularly true at the professional level in the minor leagues where the players' focus is to advance their skills and move up to the big leagues. The success of the team is a distant second in importance. Lee Mazzilli, former major leaguer turned manager, says that as a result "baseball can be a lonely, lonely job" (personal communication, March 14, 1999).

One significant difference between the college and pro game is that although the roster of a pro team changes throughout the season, a college team has a set group of players for the whole season. If the college team is going to do well over the course of a full season, the coach needs to develop all the players because each will have to contribute at some point.

**Baseball Has a Unique Culture**

Like any other sport, baseball has a unique subculture defined by unwritten rules and norms. Acting in accordance with the norms is critical for the sport psychology professional. Below are a few key elements of baseball culture, primarily at the professional level. Keep in mind, though, that the only way to really understand the culture is to be in it.

Two major perspectives operate in the game: "Old School" and "New School." One part of Old School is that baseball is a macho culture. Testosterone abounds. Many players and coaches are reluctant to discuss the mental aspects of the game because in the macho culture this connotes weakness. These players and coaches will tell you they need to work on their mechanics ("It's my swing, I'm pulling my front shoulder") when it's clearly a lack of emotional control hindering their performance. They will tell you that confidence is paramount but not want to talk about it. Denial is prevalent: Players don't want someone else getting in their "dome" (baseball slang for head or mind).

Another implication of this is that players are often reluctant to call the sport psychology consultant even after a strong relationship has been formed
and the consultation is free. Players can perceive asking for support as a sign of weakness and believe instead they should work through it on their own.

Coaches and players are often concerned about the problem of players overthinking, and fear a consultant's efforts will result in players thinking too much during their performances. Players consistently report that when they are playing their best they are not thinking about anything, so giving them things to think about will only get in the way. However, they also say they are only in this "not-thinking" mind-set at most 10% of the time. They certainly do not need to do anything differently when they are in that zone, so make it clear that your focus is on what the players do the other 90% of the time.

Superstition is another element of baseball culture. A superstition is something that the player believes brings him good luck or enhances his performance but is not "task relevant." Only in the player's head is wearing the same socks every game connected to pitching well.

If a superstition helps a player to be confident, great. Superstitions are a problem only if a player becomes too dependent on them. A player must still be able to believe he can play a good game even if he can't find his lucky belt or forgets his special necklace at home.

**Politics Play a Key Role**

All players are not treated the same. In professional baseball minor league players are rated as "prospects" or "nonprospects" by the organization. "Prospects" are given special consideration by the organization and should be given most of your attention. As a consultant, your time is limited and although you'll want to help as many people as you can, you must focus your efforts on the players the organization feels stand the best chance of playing at the Major League level. Identify the prospects and build relationships with them. At the college level, discuss with the head coach the player with whom he would most like to see you spend time, but also realize that nearly all the players will play key roles over the course of the season.

Another issue faced by minor league players is that they often feel they do not know where they stand in the organization, and as a result, they feel frustrated and insecure. Several factors can contribute to this. Organizations often do not want to let the players know their standing because they feel not knowing maximizes motivation, particularly with nonprospects. If players know the organization does not feel they are capable of playing at the major league level, they may quit, leaving the organization without quality players to support the
prospects. Also, many players now in the majors were at one time non-prospects who played themselves into prospect status, so an organization is generally slow to rule a player out completely.

Sometimes players' not knowing where they stand is simply poor communication, typical of any large organization. Other times the players simply are not able to hear what they are told about their status, not believing the bad news they hear. This is especially true when a player is sent down or released: He can be so emotionally devastated that he does not hear what is being said. Regardless of their situation, players tend to spend considerable energy wondering what the organization really thinks of them, how other players in the organization at their position are playing, and what their future holds.

The macho culture creates barriers to players expressing these insecurities and ruminations with each other or with the coaching staff, so the issues bounce around inside players' heads and interfere with their performances. A sport psychology professional who can win their trust can be an invaluable resource on this issue by refocusing them back onto factors they can control.

**Coaches and Managers Are Critical to Your Success**

Minor league coaches and managers almost all have one-year contracts, so they tend to walk on eggshells. There is ample incentive for them to do their jobs well but not stick their necks out for any reason, and the sport psychology professional is sometimes seen as a threat. The implication is that the staff might be slow to support the program, and they might perceive acknowledging your contributions as jeopardizing their position. Get support from the highest possible level. If it's clear that the top person in the organization supports the program, the incentive is there for the staff to support you. Support from the staff is vital to a mental game program. With strong support the players can benefit greatly from the program. With weak support you will struggle to make a difference with the players.

Be constantly aware of territoriality issues. Clearly define the mental game as the focus of your work. Don't coach mechanics—focus on players' thoughts and feelings. This is challenging because the game does not divide neatly into the mental game and the physical game. In fact, one of the keys to being effective is helping players integrate mental skills into the physical performance of the game. Keep in mind, however, that in most cases talking mechanics with players will jeopardize your job.
You must collaborate with the coaches to get the job done because they are with the players every day and can support the consultant's work. Keep the staff well informed on what you are doing, but also make sure the coaches are aware of the need for confidentiality in conversations with players—you can't afford to be seen as a "spy" for management.

Coaches work long and hard for very little money to develop players. Avoid media acknowledgment for your work with a player who has performed well. Sport psychology makes for a sexy story, but a story about you creates the risk of fostering resentment from a coach who works with the player every day and is more likely responsible for the player's improvement. Some consultants request that players not mention the work they've done to avoid such possibilities.

In summary, we have addressed some of the key elements of the nature of baseball that influence your effectiveness as a sport psychology professional. These will provide some insight for which issues to address and which to avoid as you enter the baseball culture.

Relationships, Credibility, and Trust

Relationships are another key to success (Ravizza, 1988). Everything is made easier or more difficult by the quality of the relationships you create. Your ability to establish rapport, be seen as credible, and be trusted determines the impact you have. If no one listens to you, it doesn't matter what you know. To be effective as a sport psychology professional in baseball, you must be perceived as credible and trustworthy (Dorfman, 1990; Ravizza, 1990; Smith & Johnson, 1990).

The key to being able to develop good relationships with others is to first develop a solid relationship with yourself. You must be authentic. Even the most die-hard, Old School coaches will be open to you and to sport psychology if what you say resonates with their experience. Even the rawest of rookies can see through a consultant trying to be something he or she is not. How you are must be congruent with what you are talking about. Nonverbal communication can be much more effective than verbal communication, so what you know is less important than how you are perceived by players and coaches.

How do you become authentic? The same way players get good—they do the work. Practice and develop the skills you talk about. Learn about yourself by paying attention to what you think and do, working with a counselor, keep-
ing a journal, or participating in training sessions or workshops. Learn baseball by playing it, being around it, and by talking with players and coaches.

We find our best, most helpful stories come from our own experiences. Visualize. Use a routine. Compete. Play the game. Join a softball or adult baseball team and see what goes through your head after you make an error. You can learn a lot by talking with athletes and coaches, and their stories will become an important resource as they complement your direct experience.

To be as effective as you can be, the principles you share with a player must be a part of you; they cannot just be concepts that you've read or heard someone talk about. You don't need to have faced Major League pitching to help a Major League batter, but you do need to have some comparable experience of applying the idea you are discussing with the player. After working with the Anaheim Angels for five years, Ravizza was told that the Major League club no longer wanted his services. The feelings that came with being "sent down" to the minor leagues gave him a new level of compassion for what the players experience when they are given bad news.

Know why you are there. Are you committed to helping people—and baseball is where you want to express this commitment—or are you simply drawn by the allure of working with elite athletes? Sometimes people go into helping professions to avoid dealing with their own personal issues. Focusing on helping others keeps the attention off themselves. Part of doing the work of being authentic is distinguishing why you want to do this work in the first place.

One suggestion is to adopt a mentor or coach to aid your ongoing development. Anyone who is committed to being his or her best has a coach. You are asking players to adopt you as a coach for their mental and emotional development, so it stands to reason that you too would work with a coach. How can you expect a player to give up his resistance to working with a consultant if you aren't willing to be vulnerable enough to be coached by someone else?

Listening is the most important consulting skill. It is a skill you develop with practice when you are committed to helping someone. Again the key issue is knowing yourself and living the skills and perspectives you are teaching. You can't hear what a player is really saying when your own head is awash with fears and self-doubts.

Structure your work in ways that are consistent with who you are and with your experience. Hanson, for example, has coached baseball for 15 years, and it greatly enhances his credibility to be in uniform, throw batting practice, and shag fly balls. Ravizza has worked in professional baseball for 15 years but
does not have baseball experience as a player or coach and, like most consultants, does not wear a uniform. The baseball culture is ruthless and will eat up someone who is being inauthentic.

Another way to gain credibility is to publish books and articles. In our society, being an author means being an expert. You gain credibility when people see that you know what you are talking about. Finally, you will be doing your job if you keep the interest of the player foremost in mind.

"Getting" a Player

Coaches and managers talk of the importance of "getting" a player. "Getting" a player means getting his attention and respect so you can help him develop. Until you "get" a player, your ability to influence him is limited.

The fundamental element is caring. When a player knows you really care about him as a person, the opening is created for you to help him improve. Although our approach is educational and not just focused on problem solving, we often have to wait for a "teachable moment"—usually when a player is struggling—before he is willing to talk and listen. When the player knows we care about him as a person, those teachable moments come more often.

There is no set way to get a player; each manager, coach, and consultant must do it in a way consistent with his or her own personal style. Fundamentals of getting a player, however, include establishing honest, direct, and fair communication and demonstrating a solid knowledge of the game, a strong work ethic, integrity, honesty, loyalty, patience, compassion, consistency, and organization.

So the principal issue for the sport psychology professional is building relationships and gaining credibility and trust with the person bringing you in, the athletes, and the coaches. Authenticity and caring are the key elements. The degree to which you bring yourself and your own experiences to the situation rather than just knowledge you have read in books determines much of your success. If you tell the players to trust themselves while performing, you must be able to do the same. Players' trust in you will be largely determined by the degree to which they sense your trust in yourself.

Getting Started

The best way to learn is to talk with players and coaches. There is no substitute for hearing things straight from players. Fortunately there is a simple way
to do this. Ask managers and coaches if you can interview their players for a project you are doing on confidence or mental preparation. Interviewing players gives you stories and firsthand knowledge of the key issues players face, and it also demonstrates that you want to learn from the player. In addition, you also quickly discover that although the athletes have developed special skills in baseball, they still have the trials and tribulations that all humans face.

Players are often reluctant to ask for help with the mental game. Begin a conversation by asking the player to help you. Tell the player you are looking to learn more about confidence in baseball, and you want his perspective. As you progress, players will talk about their confidence; ask what helps their confidence and what hurts it. Ask questions, and players will learn from their own answers, making useful new distinctions about themselves and what they need to do to be their best. As the energy of the conversation begins to wind down, thank them and tell them they have been a big help.

Be authentic. Really want to learn from them. If you are manipulative, they will recognize it. Using this inquiry approach allows players to keep their ego intact and allows you to learn and make a contribution to the player. Again, players are often reluctant to start a conversation, but are generally glad afterwards when you do.

Making Distinctions

People often see sport psychology work solely as teaching mental skills, such as visualization, routines, relaxation, self-talk, focus, breathing, and goal setting. Although these are an important part of our work, examining the way a player is viewing his performance is also a major emphasis.

One of our goals is to have a conversation that alters the way a player is looking at his situation in such a way that it gives him greater freedom to perform to his highest ability. For example, say a pitcher throws great in the bullpen but poorly in a game. Rather than simply teaching the player a routine and relaxation skills, enter into a conversation with him to distinguish what the underlying belief is that has him tense up during the game. What does it mean to him to succeed? What does it mean to fail? What beliefs are giving rise to his fear? It isn't the situation itself that is causing the stress; it's how the player is viewing his situation. Try to distinguish the source of the issue rather than simply treat the symptom.

Here is where rapport-building skills, listening skills, and experience are important. Hear the player's issue, distinguish with him how his current per-
spective is limiting him, and illustrate your point with a story of another athlete who fell into a similar mental trap (be sure the story is anonymous unless you know the player in the story agrees with your sharing it).

Don't put pressure on yourself to come up with THE brilliant answer. Give a player space to talk and ask him some basic questions, and the player will distinguish something useful for himself. Actually, it's usually best to let a player talk through his situation and come to his own conclusion rather than to lecture him. Simply telling a player to trust himself is not as likely to make a difference for him as his deducing it for himself in a conversation will. This process also helps the player learn to learn from himself.

Keep in mind that the distinction made is almost always the player's remembering something he used to do rather than your teaching him something new. Some of the more common distinctions we see include

1. He has forgotten that baseball is difficult and acts as if it were easy (i.e., becomes overly upset when he makes an out).
2. He has forgotten why he plays baseball in the first place.
3. He began playing baseball because he loved it and now he has made it a job.
4. He used to play baseball, and now it has become work.
5. He has forgotten that he is playing against the best players in the world.
6. He is totally focused on outcomes and statistics instead of the process of playing the game (for example, he is trying to get hits instead of hitting the ball hard).
7. He is focused on what others (front office, manager, family) are thinking of him rather than on being himself.
8. He is trying to play outside of his abilities (a small player trying to hit home runs, a ground-ball pitcher trying to strike guys out).
9. He has tied his self-esteem to his performance (he is a good person when he plays well, a bad person when he does poorly).

Occasionally you will have a conversation where a player has an "Aha!" experience and a significant shift in how he is performing, but more often it is a nondramatic, gradual process. Be patient. Don't try to force some brilliant insight. Your commitment to helping the player is more important than being brilliant.

The next step is to devise a plan to put this new approach into action. If the player's behavior does not change, his performance does not change. Agree to some type of practice that the player is going to adopt. Examples
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include increasing emotional intensity during batting practice, using a pre-at-bat routine, developing a plan to release negative emotions on the field, and keeping a journal.

Let subsequent conversations focus on whether the player is following the plan he agreed to and what he is observing as a result of the practice. In fact, don't even allow the player to talk to you about his game results (how many hits he got, how many runs he gave up) in order to reinforce the importance of process over results.

Link the Mental Game and the Physical Game

Regardless of the issue you are discussing, if players and coaches do not see the practical application of it, you have no chance of gaining their respect, so it is important to link the "mental game" to the physical game. Make this link by discussing and demonstrating what the player is thinking at specific moments in the game, tying the thoughts to physical movements. For examples of how to do this, see Heads-up Baseball: Playing the Game One Pitch at a Time (Ravizza & Hanson, 1995).

Actually, the distinction between the mental game and physical game is an artificial one, made up through language so we can talk about it more easily. The distinction serves the sport psychology professional because it gives him or her a niche, a place to say, "I work in the mental game." Although there are aspects that seem more mental and others that seem more physical, there are not a mental game and a physical game—it's all baseball.

Make the distinction between mental skills and game strategy. Coaches sometimes think "mental game" only means which pitch to throw when, whether or not to steal a base, or what bunt coverage to run. Mental skills help a player think clearly to make the most effective strategic choice. We do not coach players on which game strategy choice is best.

Integrate the sport psychology knowledge with what the players are doing physically without crossing into coaching mechanics. That's part of the "dance" the sport psychology professional has to do all the time. The better rapport and communication you have with the coaching staff, the less likely you are to have trouble in this area.

Even the term mental game is inadequate because it misses the emotional aspects of performance. An athlete can be mentally focused on the right things but be washed out of his performance state by his own emotional
response to a pressure situation (Botterill, Patrick, & Sawatzky, 1996). Thus an athlete has to be emotionally as well as mentally prepared. We're using "mental game" in this chapter because it is established in the baseball culture.

**Common Player Issues**

Below is a brief discussion of what we feel are the key issues players face in baseball. For more detailed descriptions of these ideas, see Ravizza and Hanson (1995). Another excellent resource is *The Mental Game of Baseball* by Dorfman and Kuehl (1989).

The combination of the nature of baseball and the nature of human beings results in many common mental-game issues. The most frequent of these include players:

1. Focusing on things outside their control (which includes getting caught up in statistics, focusing on results rather than process, and spending time and energy worrying about what moves the general manager or head coach is going to make),
2. Not playing one pitch at a time—carrying previous pitches and at-bats into their present performance,
3. Not having a plan or purpose for each pitch,
4. Not trusting their own ability,
5. Losing connection with why they play the game,
6. Getting into slumps,
7. Overfocusing on mechanics,
8. Trying to be perfect, and
9. Personalizing their performance (linking how they are performing with how they feel about themselves as people).

The goal is for the player to consistently be himself, fully focused and fully trusting himself on each pitch. The only aspect of the game the player can control is himself, so his knowledge of himself is paramount and is the foundation for all mental-game issues. We will also discuss self-control and confidence. Consistency is a thread that runs throughout our work because of the number and frequency of the games played. Any player can be great for a day. The ones who rise to the top play well consistently.

**Self-Knowledge**

The fundamental challenge for the player is to know himself. Long-time major league pitching coach Billy Connors says, "I want a pitcher to know himself so
he can go out there on the mound and be himself" (personal communication, March 1999).

"Knowing yourself" as a baseball player includes knowing why you play baseball, what type of player you are, what thoughts and actions lead to your best performances, what your strengths and weaknesses are, and what your goals are. Self-knowledge is the foundation for other key elements of the mental game, and it includes confidence, focus, mental preparation and regrouping, all of which enable a player to consistently play to the best of his ability.

What both players and coaches must realize is that the mental game is a part of, not separate from, the physical game.

Hall-of-Famer Nolan Ryan attributes much of his success to the fact that he constantly studied himself. He knew the nuances of his mechanics, what his workouts needed to be, what he should eat, when he should eat, how much rest he needed, and how he needed to focus during a game. "I paid attention to my body," he said (personal communication, February 1999). Ryan clearly considered his performance a 24-hour-per-day business. All of the choices he made about how to spend his time came from making observations about
himself. He continually asked himself: "What do I need to do to be the best player I can be?" His goal was to be consistent, and his incredible record stemmed from his knowledge of what led to his best performances (personal communication, February 1999).

Mark McGwire attributes his success during the past few years to the work he has done getting to know himself as a person. When asked why a few years ago he said he did not like what he saw when he looked in the mirror, McGwire responded:

I didn't know who I was. I am so firm that you have to be grounded on this earth to be successful. I was floating, I didn't have my feet on the ground. I didn't know who I was, I didn't know what I liked. I went and searched out to get help, which a lot of people shy away from because if they go to see a psychologist, they think there is something wrong with them. Well, I guarantee there is something wrong with everybody on this earth. (Williamson, 1999b)

A principal role of a sport psychology professional is to help players know themselves better. The better a player knows himself, the better choices he is able to make regarding how to spend his time and energy, enabling him to make the most of his ability. Such self-knowledge also helps guard against basing his self-esteem on his performance.

**Freedom and Responsibility of Choice**

One of the first things a player needs to know about himself is that he has the freedom to determine his perspective on what happens to him. As a human being he has the ability to choose his thoughts and actions, and the thoughts and actions he takes determine his performance. One of the cornerstones of our approach is "You can't control what happens to you, but you can control your response to it." This is good news for the player: Given his physical limitations, he can choose to be the player he wants to be.

The flip side to that freedom is that his thoughts and actions are his responsibility. If he is free to choose his thoughts and actions regardless of his situation, he owes it to his team and himself to think the most performance-enhancing thoughts he possibly can. Going into a depressed, slumping mindset is a selfish act because it hurts the team's chance of winning.

A player does not have to lose confidence after a strikeout. Reggie Jackson said late in his career that he could become more confident after striking out.
because he now knew how the pitcher would try to get him out. Helping a player understand that he has free will is a first step in enhancing his mental game.

**What Are You Doing When You're Playing Great?**

A good place to start a conversation with any player is asking him about what he is doing, thinking, and feeling when he is playing his best. Get him to recall a specific game or series when he was in the "zone" or "hot," and ask him questions that make him examine what contributed to this performance. How did he prepare for the game? What did he spend his time thinking about before the game? During the game? What did he focus on? How did he feel while performing? Then use this information to create a preperformance routine (see chapter 4, which focuses on preperformance routines in sport; Ravizza, 1977).

A routine is a set series of mental actions intended to create an "internal climate" that gives players their best chance for success. Adherence to a routine does not guarantee peak performance, but it does set the stage for such a performance to happen. Players seem to understand that having a routine is analogous to going to sleep at night. Just as you can't will yourself into the "zone," you can't will yourself to sleep. You can, though, set the stage for sleep to happen. You go to the bathroom, brush your teeth, change your clothes, get into bed, turn out the light, put your head on the pillow, and close your eyes. This does not guarantee a good night's sleep, but it does make such an outcome more likely.

A preperformance routine does the same thing. What are the steps a player takes that lead to his best performances? What does a hitter do in batting practice, on the bench, on deck and at the plate when he is hitting great? What does a relief pitcher do and think during batting practice, during the first few innings of the game, during his warm-up after he's told to get ready to come in, during his warm-up pitches once he comes into the game, and before each pitch?

The player's preperformance routine is based on his knowledge of himself, of the actions and thoughts he needs to take to give himself his best chance of playing well. It is his recipe for consistent, top-level performance.

**Why Do You Play?**

Another fundamental question a player should answer for himself is why he plays the game. Ask a player why he plays baseball, and he's likely to say,
"Because I love it." Ask what he loves about it, and he'll likely say, "The competition." You may hear many different answers, but ultimately baseball players play because it provides them with an opportunity to experience feelings they enjoy feeling.

Players who are not performing well usually have lost connection with why they play the game. They once played for the experience of fun, enjoyment, love, passion, and intensity, but now they are experiencing boredom, frustration, anger, or resignation. Their reason for playing needs to be kept center stage to help pull, push, or guide them through the long hours and disappointments of baseball. One former teammate of Roger Clemens said, "You'd never know he was making nine million dollars, he trains and practices and competes so intensely." Clemens does not lose sight of why he plays the game.

Distinguish the feelings a player loves to have while playing the game—at the plate, during his pitching delivery, anticipating the ground ball—and encourage him to learn how to feel these feelings consistently. Pitchers will talk about feeling "free," "fluid," "easy," "natural," "smooth," "powerful," and "rhythm" during their motions. Nonpitchers will say they feel "loose," "relaxed," "cocky," and "confident" to describe how they feel at the plate or on defense.

Ask "If you were committed to feeling 'free, fluid, and easy' throughout the game tonight, how would you do it? What actions and thoughts would you need to take now, during pregame, and during the game that would have you feel that way?" Then the player is to choose to take those actions regardless of his circumstances. He will not be able to create the wonderful feelings he loves to have every day, and he must know he can play very well without feeling very well. Knowing the feeling he wants gives him a clear target to shoot for, adding consistency to his performance (Newburg, 1999).

What Type of Player Are You?

Another key to a player's knowing himself is knowing the type of player he is. Coaches often tell a player to "stay within yourself." What does that mean? In order to stay within himself, a player has to have an accurate assessment of his capabilities and limits. One way to help a player distinguish the type of player he is is to ask him who he thinks is someone else in the Major Leagues who has essentially the same "tools" (ability to run, throw, hit, hit with power, and play defense). His response gives you and the coaching staff an understanding of how well the player understands his abilities.
What Is Your Best Approach?

Many of the obstacles players have to overcome stem from a lack of knowledge about who they are as players and what approach they take to the game when they are playing well. Batting slumps, for example, are often caused by a player's getting away from the approach to hitting that works best for him. Most hitters hit best when they try to hit the ball hard up the middle, but something will happen, such as pulling a ball for a home run, that gets the player trying to pull the ball for more home runs. He is then out in front of pitches, commits himself too soon, and takes long, tense swings with his front shoulder pulling off the ball. This leads to a lot of strikeouts and weak groundouts. After struggling for a while, he will be coached to keep his front shoulder in. This may make things worse because his focus is on his shoulder instead of the ball. Players and coaches often look for a mechanical solution when the problem is in the mental approach.

Eventually the player gets a bloop base hit or a two-strike opposite-field line drive, and he gets the feeling back that he can hit—he feels like his old self. He is now more relaxed, not trying as hard, and focusing on hitting the ball up the middle.

The better a player knows himself and what he does when he is playing well, the less frequently he will stray from his best thinking and the shorter and less severe his slumps will be. The player who pays attention to himself has the best chance to play consistently near his best.

Again, the basic plan is simple:
1. Distinguish the factors that lead to the player's best performances.
2. Establish a structure such as a preperformance routine that will remind him to take those actions before each performance.

Self-Control

Once a player has a sense of what thoughts and actions result in his best performance, the key is to develop the ability to have these thoughts and perform these actions consistently. You may help a player make a distinction, obtain an insight, or develop a routine that enhances his performance in the short run, but if he does not practice it, he will quickly lose it. The player is always free to choose his thoughts and perspective, but unless he chooses them consistently enough to form a new habit, he will almost immediately revert to his
more familiar ways of thinking. Mental skills are developed just like physical skills—through practice.

Doing the work of developing the mental game can be compared to doing reps in the weight room or practicing a martial art in that it takes time and effort. It is not a linear process: The player will progress, hit plateaus, and have setbacks. Long-term, consistent top performances result from the consistent application of a strategy. A player will often try something for a short time, and even though he may say it helps him, he will forget about it before long.

The role of the consultant is to provide inspiration, education, and feedback to support the player in developing his mental game. Often this means calling players and initiating conversations and giving players assignments to do between meetings. Two basic skills players can develop to help them better "control" themselves are breathing and visualization. Remind the players: Self-control leads to body control, which leads to ball (or bat) control (Ravizza & Hanson, 1995).

Breathing. Players consistently report that taking a deep breath between pitches is one of the most helpful ideas they hear from us. A full breath (into the belly if possible) helps a player get "centered" and gain control of himself. The breath slows things down for the player, helps him think clearly, and relaxes muscles that have been tensed during the course of the previous pitch.

Visualization and focus. Hank Aaron said his ability to focus is what enabled him to be so incredibly consistent and to put up astronomical career statistics including 755 home runs and 2,297 RBIs. He said visualization was the key to his focus and that it was not something he was born with but rather: a skill he developed through years of practice. He visualized facing the pitcher throwing against him all through the day of the game and before each at-bat to prepare himself mentally to lock in his focus (Hanson, 1991).

Bert Blyleven, 273-game winner, says "Visualization is concentration" (Ravizza & Hanson, 1995, p. 57). Seeing in his mind's eye the last 2-3 feet of each pitch just before starting his windup was key to his being focused on one pitch at a time.

Developing these skills enables a player to alter the way he feels and to gain control of himself. Just as important, these skills help a player perform well when he does not feel confident or maybe does not even feel like playing. This can happen often during a season of over 100 games. A player with a strong mental game acts consistently with his commitment to being the player he wants to be rather than simply playing according to how he feels at a given moment.
Confidence

Most players usually say 80% or more of their game is determined by their confidence. They also generally report that the most powerful determinant of their confidence is the results they are producing. Because the results they are producing (getting hits, getting batters out) are outside their control, that means their confidence is outside their control. Nearly everything we do with the players is ultimately intended to enable them to take greater control of their own confidence level.

Players know what they need to do to be confident, but either they are not aware that they know or for some reason they choose not to do it. When asked, players will typically mention that off-the-field actions that can help them be more confident include eating a healthy diet, getting quality rest, using weight training, conditioning, visualizing playing well, and being on top of money issues and also the status of their relationships with their girlfriend, wife, parents, and friends.

Pregame actions that build confidence can include doing drill work, working out, executing well at the plate during batting practice, intently taking balls off the bat during batting practice, and doing "homework" on the opposing hitters or pitcher.

During the game, players report studying the opponent, visualizing successful performances, using preperformance routines, taking deep breaths, and talking with teammates, all of which can help them feel more confident.

After the game a player can help his confidence by reviewing what happened in the game he just played and taking note of what he learned. Some committed players will keep a journal of what they observed about themselves during a game, which in turn greatly facilitates learning. Again, although the distinctions we provide and skills that players develop can help them feel more confident, they also help a player to play well even when he is not confident. Players often make the mistake of thinking good players never lose their belief in themselves. A few days before being inducted to the Hall of Fame, George Brett said, "I was scared to death every time I put on that uniform" (Williamson, 1999a). The key is to have the desire to succeed be greater than the fear (Newburg, 1999).

Other Issues

Players are faced with many other issues than those we have described in this chapter, including planning quality practices, developing mental preparation,
breaking out of slumps, dealing with the long season, and establishing relationships with teammates. Helping a player with any of these issues comes back to helping a player get to know himself.

"How should I prepare for a game?" "What should I be focused on at the plate?" "What is the best way for me to pull myself together when I 'lose it' in the middle of an inning?" Although we have noticed recurring themes in different players, the "best" answer to these questions varies with the individual.

The consultant brings his or her past experience with what has worked for other people to each issue, but the objective is to get the player to understand that there is no one "best" solution that works for all players. Help the player determine what works best for him and then develop his ability to use that strategy consistently.

Conclusion

This chapter reviewed the basic issues involved in doing sport psychology work with professional and college baseball teams. Our intent was to help sport psychology professionals and college and professional coaches more effectively enhance the performance of players. We have outlined the principal issues we face when performing sport psychology work in baseball. Most of the observations stemmed from our experiences in professional baseball, but the key issues faced are common to players and coaches at all levels.

As "New School" people gain greater control, baseball is gradually becoming more receptive to sport psychology professionals. The greatest barrier to more people working in the game is the lack of sport psychology professionals possessing the qualities needed to be effective. We hope this chapter will assist consultants in their efforts to be of service to baseball players and coaches.
References


