

A PERSPECTIVE ON THE MENTAL APPROACH TO BASEBALL

By Herndon P. Harding, Jr., M.D. Medical Director Florida Hospital Center for Behavioral Health
Member, USA Baseball Medical & Safety Advisory Group

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In past articles for USA Baseball News, the Medical/Safety Advisory Committee has given a perspective on sport. For fairly apparent reasons, it seemed appropriate to address the best way for an amateur to approach the game mentally, especially with the issue of escalating salaries in professional baseball, and the high dollar signs potential pro players often see.

With the announcement of Alex Rodriguez' 252 million contract, one would hope that monetary reward leads to stellar performance. Indeed, most highly paid athletes do partially meet this expectation set by commanding such high salaries. Look at Pedro Martinez and Mike Piazza, for instance. Most players don't link their salary with their day to day motivation for on the field performance.

On the contrary, when asked about how money affects their play, most professionals describe being aware of money and stats only periodically during the season, and never during the immediacy of the game. No one has a successful at bat thinking "If I hit this pitch, my batting average will go up .002, and that will help in arbitration!!" Instead of focusing on those and other distractions, the players who perform best, both professionally and at amateur levels, are those who enjoy the competition of the game. They strive to win for victory's sake and also don't feel as though one loss, or one day's poor performance, is the end of the world.

This latter point, putting things in perspective, is where many players at all levels of baseball struggle. If every play, every at bat, is seen as having potentially devastating ramifications, then the player is likely to be over anxious, engaging his "civilized brain", and isn't allowing his well practiced athletic habits to do what they've been trained to do. He/she experiences anxiety, muscle tension and fear, all of which interfere with the ability to physically perform. He/she overrides well trained "perfect practice makes perfect" responses by over-thinking.

Studies show that one performs best if one can be in a mindset that is like the mindset experienced during practices. Your anxiety level in a game should be approximately the same as in practice, if you want your reflexes to perform optimally. When you see a double play where the movements of the infielders seem choreographed, graceful and smooth, it's because they know and trust what they're doing, not worried about how they look, or possibly failing. So, how does one nurture a "put it in perspective" attitude?

First put yourself in the game mentally, allowing other important issues of life to be left, temporarily, outside the white lines; you can deal with them later. For now, though, be where you are. Secondly, consider every play, pitch or at bat an opportunity that you're eager for, not an "if I can just get out of this..." threat. The best at bat self-talk I've heard is that on every pitch, the batter said "This one is MINE!" He would of course have to sometime change his mind to not swing; but he would never start out planning not to swing, suddenly going to "Yikes, that's down the middle!" He anticipated an opportunity; he didn't wait or hope for one.

Lastly, realizing that even though winning is important, it isn't everything. Even the quote often attributed to Vince Lombardi "Winning isn't everything, it's the only thing" was never said by him. He actually said "Winning isn't everything, trying to win is." More important than the win itself is striving,

picking yourself up when you fall, enjoying your accomplishments, and putting it all in perspective with your personal values.

These things make one a better person, not just someone who wins games. The irony is that the person who best puts their life in order and gets perspective usually prioritizes effectively and can perform with less anxiety and more success, both on and off the field, prolonging a productive amateur or professional career and ...getting bigger contracts!!!