

Article #1: Mental Training: Being Processed Oriented

Title: Mental Practice: A Daily Routine

Source: Collegiate Baseball

Date: Friday, October 2nd, 2009

Mental Practice: A Daily Routine

If Mental Practice is not part of your daily routine then don't expect your players to be mentally prepared in game situations

Practice makes perfect, or so it is said. That's why we take thousands of ground balls and fly balls. That's why pitchers throw a lot, and hitters hit a lot. And that's why coaches spend so much time on first and third run downs, relays, bunt defense, and base running.

It's not that physical practice isn't important -- it's very important. But if baseball is at least 90% *mental*, between the lines, then why are typical practice plans centered exclusively around physical preparation? Of course, this would make perfect sense if we were in agreement that baseball is 100% physical. But most players and coaches would readily agree that baseball is at least 90% mental in game situations. Which begs the question, "how can we afford *not* to have mental practice incorporated into our daily practice plan if a player's performance relies so heavily on his mental skills and preparation"?

The truth is you will rarely see a practice plan designate a "station" for mental training or practice on a daily basis.

Paradigm Shift

After many years of working with players and coaches in the baseball community it has become very clear to me that mental practice on a daily basis is a *prerequisite*, rather than an *option*. To put players into a performance setting, where the potential pressures and stressors of winning and losing are at stake -- where statistics count and people are in the stands -- and to not have prepared the players minds in a similar manner in which their arm or swing is prepared no longer makes sense.

Perhaps, 20 years ago, when mental training was more of a nebulous field and often frowned upon as a weakness, could we pass the buck? But in this day and age that responsibility can no longer be avoided. As a coach, it is your responsibility to prepare your players to perform at their highest level between the lines, both physically and mentally. And if you have little or no training in the mental training field, that is no longer a viable reason to neglect mental practice.

The information is out there -- several outstanding books and CD's that discuss the basics of Mental Training, along with countless articles on the internet are just a click away. Sport Psychologists (in many cases, Sport Psychology grad students on your campus) and people in the Mental Training field are out there to assist you.

Not having time in your practice plan is no longer an option when you consider that a players mental game is the most important and influential part of his or her game. This article has been

written with this in mind.

Defining Mental Training

The most important and influential part of your game can be practiced without picking up a ball or a bat

Though Mental Training and Sport Psychology have become somewhat main stream in the past 10 years, many coaches and players are still, understandably so, somewhat in the dark as to what Mental Training is and how it is applied. Like anything in life if we understand *what* something is, *why* we are doing it and *what* the benefits of it are we are more likely to engage in it.

With that said, let's not make this too complicated -- Mental Training is no different than any other kind of training -- it is simply developing and enhancing "skills" through practice (Technique) and understanding that specific strategies can teach us how to be more "skilled" in game situations (Game Management). In both cases, these "skills" just happened to be predominately "mental" (e.g. relaxation, concentration, confidence), rather than physical.

Mental Training can be broken down into two basic categories: Mental Practice(Technique) and Game Management. In this section we are going to define Mental Practice and the benefits that can be gained from having a daily "practice".

Game Management, which will be addressed in the subsequent section, focuses more on the strategic side of the game and how a few basic themes (e.g .being Process Oriented) can train the mind how to work for us, rather than against us -- to be more consistent from the practice field to the playing field -- to be relied upon, rather than unpredictable.

Mental Practice

Through various forms of exercises (Breathing, Imagery, Visualization)and done in the privacy and comforts of the practice field, clubhouse or classroom players can develop and improve upon specific mental skills, including, Relaxation, Concentration, Discipline, Clarity of Mind, Being Present and Confidence that are essential to having a strong mental game(players can ultimately do this work in the comforts of their own home).

At the center of these exercises is the *breath* and the role it plays in enhancing physical and mental health. The breath, like the engine to your car, is the key to keeping the body and mind running smoothly and efficiently.

Besides the physical benefits that are gained from healthy breathing habits(including relaxed muscles, lower blood pressure, improved circulation, increased energy), there are several mental benefits that can be developed through breath work as well. For example, because the breath is often used as a focal point during mental practice the mind can begin to identify with several important *mental* skills in conjunction with the breath including: *Relaxation*, because proper breathing patterns can physiologically train and influence the body and mind to be more relaxed -- *Concentration*, because attention and focus can be dramatically improved when we commit

our attention specifically to the breath -- *Discipline*, because it takes a lot of determination and perseverance to stay committed to your breath if distractions (thoughts) try to win over your attention – *Clarity of Mind*, because your breath is “not a thought” it trains the mind how to be in a “non-thinking” place (and out of your head) – *Being present*, because the breath is always happening now, it serves as a constant reminder (including away from your practice) to come back to this moment, this action (being present is also consistent with teaching the mind how to be *processed oriented*, which is an essential “mental game strategy” that will be addressed in the next section, Game Management) -- *Confidence*, because the breath is a very natural and primordial aspect of each of us, focusing on it gives us a sense of unconditional trust and guidance. Also, as we begin to feel more relaxed, clear minded and focused as a result of practice through breath work, we tend to feel much better about any activity we undertake.

Finally, once a consistent practice has been established the breath can be used as a powerful resource away from your practice. Because the body and mind begin to associate several, beneficial feelings as a result of your practice there is a “recall” effect that is based on conditioning or muscle memory. It is no different than the recall effect a player has from ingraining any other skill. When a hard ground ball is hit to a 3rd baseman, he “reacts” to it from the recall of taking thousands of ground balls. This is what’s called an Unconscious Trigger.

For example, a deep breath away from your practice can serve as an Unconscious Trigger that can link you back to the state of mind *formatted* during your mental practice. Whatever skills you are developing and ingraining through your mental practice (e.g. Relaxation, Clarity of Mind, Confidence) your breath serves as a trigger to “recall” and promote those positive feelings and attributes that have been established in your mental practice. This is how mental practice can have such a dramatic effect on physical performance (Note: See Sidebar at the end of this article for Mental Practice: Getting Started).

Game Management

Success is best established when a player is committed to the present action, rather than the result of his or her action

Where mental practice is the key to laying down the foundation for a strong and healthy mental game away from the playing field, how you approach the game strategically on the playing field is also imperative to maximizing your success in game situations (as you will see, the word “success” may take on a completely new meaning by the end of this article). That’s because Mental Practice and Game Management are like the two wings of a bird -- they must work together.

There is one catch here -- where Mental Practice can begin to lay down the foundation for healthy habits (relaxation, concentration, clarity of mind) the mind can still be quite active on “game day” simply because it is accustomed to “old habits”. These old habits are based on the concept that on game day there is “more at stake”. This is what is called consequential or *result oriented* thinking and occur for a number of reasons: winning and losing is at stake; statistics count; there are potentially a lot of eye’s watching (coaches, peers, scouts, media). Thus, the

relaxed atmosphere of the practice field can be replaced by pressure and stress; free and easy movements can turn into “trying too hard”; pure reactions can be replaced by over thinking. In short, *process oriented* action in practice can turn into *result oriented* thinking in game situations.

As you will see in the next two sections this *result oriented* thinking is a by-product of growing up in a result oriented society. Though it has been shown through studies that players perform at their best when they aren't thinking about results (thinking about anything), the mind tends to “default” to result oriented thinking simply because it's been trained to think that way.

Understanding why the mind tends to gravitate toward this mentality, when it actually functions at its *best* when the results are *no longer* the focal point is essential to understanding how to excel in game situations.

Our Ideal State of Mind: Peak Performance and being Process Oriented

Result Oriented thinking is in direct opposition to what has been termed a Peak State of mind, or the most ideal state of mind that an athlete can enter into during performance. Also referred to as “Locked In”, “The Zone” or “Unconscious Performance”, research on Peak Performance shows that this optimal state of mind occurs when an athletes mind is *absent* of consequences -- his or her mind is too *consumed* by the present moment. The athlete is experiencing the ultimate feelings of being relaxed, clear minded and instinctive because he or she is *unconscious* of the consequences -- there isn't any concept of winning or losing, statistics or who is in the stands.

This *preoccupation* with the action itself, rather than the consequence of the action, is what is meant by being *processed oriented*. Being processed oriented is one of the most fundamental principles associated with being in a peak state of mind.

Result Oriented Thinking: The Effect of Society

Though most athletes understand the importance of focusing on the present moment or task at hand, and have probably realized that their best games seem to “happen” when they aren't thinking and simply reacting, the mind, through social conditioning tends to focus on the results of our actions simply because that's how it's been *trained* to think.

This old *programming* is the net result of growing up in a society where so much emphasis is placed on the goal, instead of the path leading to the goal. Not that there is anything wrong with setting goals, but true success is based on our commitment to an action, rather than the result of our action. The future is unknown, and can often cause distractions and pressures. It's like a hitter saying, “I want to go 4 for 4 today” or a pitcher saying, “I want to throw a shutout today”.

Going 4 for 4 and throwing a shutout are “results” --they are the by-product of a good approach or being process oriented. If your approach (process) is solid then you are best positioned to have a successful result. I tell our players to be “great at committing to your execution” -- what happens after that is out of your control. This seems to take a lot of pressure off of them because the mind can relax when it only has to focus on one thing -- this action -- rather than the consequences or results of the action (or who is watching our action).

A process oriented hitter in the above example might say something like, “see the ball well and

hit it hard”, and the pitcher might say, “see the target and attack it”. In both cases the players mind’s are focused on the present action and committing to it. This is a *relief* to the mind because it keeps things simple. The mind doesn’t want to have to worry about the future *or* past. Even though it may seem beneficial to “think about being the hero by driving in the winning run”, this often puts pressure on a player because the attention has shifted away from the task at hand to “becoming the hero”. It’s far more advantageous for a player stick to a repeatable game plan (see the ball and hit it hard), and stay committed to *that* action. There is nothing to think about (future/result) when the mind is committed to the task at hand. And thinking, as we all know, can get players distracted very quickly.

Thinking about the results of our actions is one prime example of how the brain has been programmed to think from an early age. But there are other factors that have also played a role in the minds programming. For example, baseball is a statistics driven sport (e.g. stat sheets posted on the dugout wall/internet). Statistics can easily preoccupy your mind with the results of our actions and be a constant distraction throughout the game. For an example, each at bat for a hitter or pitch for a pitcher may have a consequence on their batting average or earned run average. Hitters want to hit over .300 and pitchers want to have an ERA under 3.00. Hitters often think about their at-bats in terms of going 2-4 or “not” going 0-4. Pitchers may think about how many strike outs they have, or getting to the 5th inning so they are eligible for their win. Hitters may tell themselves that if they get a hit in their first at-bat, they can relax the rest of the game. Conversely, if they are 0-3 going into their last at bat, they may feel desperate to get a hit. A pitcher may think that if he throws another ball, he’ll walk the batter or if he can just get through the first inning, everything will be fine. Players make act differently if there are scouts in the stands, if they are playing on the road or if it’s a “playoff” game. These are only a few of countless scenarios that often tend to go through a players mind throughout a game and take the players focus off of what really matters -- this moment, this pitch, this action.

Though statistics do seem to play a major role in preoccupying the mind with result oriented thinking, other notable factors include: College Scholarships, SAT scores, the Major League Draft, Coaches, Peers, Media.

This results oriented mentality has become familiar and prevalent simply because that is how society has conditioned the mind to think. This helps explain why players may excel in practice (absence of consequences) and struggle in game situations (consequences).

Being Proactive: Changing Old Behaviors Through Practice And Awareness

In our society, this process oriented mind-set is as unfamiliar as a result oriented mind set is familiar

The catch here is that unless the mind is trained on a daily basis to “undo” old, result oriented programming there is going to be a tendency for the mind to revert back to it quite simply, because that’s what it’s “used to doing”. This is what is called a “default” system, and this overriding behavior can be very troublesome if left unchecked, even if you think you can flip the switch by telling yourself, “I’m going to be a process oriented player”, or, “I’m going to focus on the present moment”. This can be helpful, and in the long run, imperative to “think” this way.

But old behaviors tend to kick in unless these behaviors are changed and rewired through a consistent, sustained attitude and practice. That's why mental practice is just that -- a practice. It's a daily, dedicated practice to replace result oriented thinking with processed oriented action and to eliminate the distinction between the "practice" and "playing" field. It's a practice that helps teach you how to clear your mind, and relax your body -- improve concentration and focus -- feel more calmness, confidence and peace in your life. It's a change in your awareness that places gratification on a great approach rather than the result of the approach.

Just like ground balls and fly balls, it's something that must be integrated as part of your daily practice plan. It's not something that you work on for a couple of weeks, and then assume that it is accounted for. You wouldn't spend 2 weeks in a martial arts studio and think you've earned a black belt -- it may take a few years (and then you could work on your 2nd and 3rd degree black belt!). Building skills and changing behaviors are *earned* over an extended period of time.

Through practice and awareness this concept of focusing on the process is the catalyst to the mind beginning to distance itself from old, result oriented programming. Whether it's learning how to relax, clear your mind and be more confident, these are all "career changing" attributes that can be acquired and enhanced through mental practice.

The good news is that behind the clouds (old thinking) the sun is always shining. The sun is symbolic of your perfect state of mind, your best game waiting to *happen*. Without mental practice you may be wondering why the sun is not shining if your head is in the clouds (thoughts/tension) in game situations -- wondering why it's hard to stay relaxed, clear minded, focused and confident when the uniform goes on -- wondering why the mind starts thinking about the future when you want to stay in the present -- wondering why the free and easy movements of the practice environment are not translating into game situations.

The Time Is NOW

Mental Training is a part of the game that needs to be worked on daily. When you consider that in performance situations a typical player's thought process will tend to reflect a mentality (result oriented) that is programmed to create thinking, tension, anxiety and pressure, it's time to make an adjustment.

Making this transition from a result oriented mentality to that of a process oriented mentality is a two pronged approach. The "practice" is the key to changing the message at the most fundamental levels (neuromuscular, behavioral, instinctive). But to supplement this core change, the mind also needs some strategic tools to focus on away from the mental practice environment that can be relied upon. Chief among these strategies is to be process oriented.

Ultimately, if your mental practice is consistent, your "game management" approach tends to become an extension of your mental practice. In other words, the state of mind and body that you are creating through your breathing exercises (visualization, etc.) become you. In fact, your breathing exercises can not only bring you a myriad of benefits that were previously discussed, but the sheer act of your mental practice is a processed oriented exercise. As you become

familiar with such beneficial skills as relaxation, clarity of mind, confidence and being focused these feelings have a chance to become part of how you “think” and how you feel. Whether you are in the privacy of your own home, in the classroom or on the playing field, you can feel how this mentality taking over.

It’s really not a very complicated issue anymore. If you believe that teaching your players how to have a clear and relaxed mind is important-- if you believe that teaching your players how to be more committed to the process of their actions, rather than the results of their actions is important than there isn’t anything *but* time to work on these skills. You are in a position to do something about it rather than push it to the side as something you don’t understand or something you don’t have time for. Whether you buy it or not, that’s where society is going anyway. Mental training and practice is becoming part of the mainstream of society and if you are resisting this change, you are ultimately delaying your players from discovering the most important instruction they can get -- how to optimize their mind both on and off the playing field.

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