



Your Change Agents

Five mental strategies create a winning game

By National Fastpitch Coaches Association

The mental game revolves around five important mental characteristics:

1. commitment,
2. composure,
3. concentration,
4. confidence
5. consistency.

These five skills are the critical elements athletes need to be able to perform at their potential. They form the basis of the mental training program that is used with elite athletes. Let's examine how each of these mental skills can be used by all of us in developing ourselves and our people! Read an excerpt from *The Softball Coaching Bible*.

1. Commitment

Getting athletes to perform to their potential really starts with commitment. Players must be committed in order to work hard, practice with quality, and improve their skills. In essence, commitment means that players play with passion, are intense competitors, and put their hearts into the game. Unfortunately, commitment can sometimes be difficult to find in today's athletes. How can you as a coach get your players to be more motivated and committed? In our fall ball meetings with our freshmen at Arizona, one of the first things we have them do is think ahead to the end of their careers. They project ahead four or five years to the end of the year banquet following their senior seasons. As they imagine this future event, we ask them to think about and note what they would like the coaches to say about them when their college careers are over. We also ask them to consider how they would like to be remembered by their teammates, support staff, parents, and fans. In essence, we are asking them to explore what type of impact and legacy they would like to leave on the program.

We encourage them to envision their legacy before they even see their first pitch on the college level. When your players examine the kind of careers they want to have, you begin to discover their reasons and motivation for playing. This exercise reveals what drives each player to succeed as well as keys to motivating them. Many players want to be remembered as being hard workers, team players, effective leaders, and winners, as players who are committed and have a great attitude. Some talk of the desire to win conference and national championships during their careers. Others may talk about All-Conference,

All-American, and even Player of the Year honors. Not surprisingly, virtually every player wants to leave a positive and lasting legacy on the program. Your challenge as a coach is to harness the power of these motives and encourage your players to commit to working on their long-term legacy now. The difference between wishes and mission is commitment.

Commitment is the single most important factor that differentiates champions from the average. While every athlete wishes she could be successful, only a few make the commitment to pursue their dreams. Commitment entails action. It means deciding your destiny not by fate or luck but by determination, sweat, and hard work. Inform your players that a commitment is a promise to themselves that they will consistently do what is necessary to achieve their mission. If your players want to be remembered as being dedicated and successful at the end of their careers, show them how they can start working on that legacy today by setting daily goals. Each day they are presented with numerous opportunities to become the players they would like to be. They can commit to being leaders in conditioning workouts or they can choose to slack off. They can commit to coming to practice early and taking extra batting practice, or they can choose to show up just seconds before practice starts. They can commit to approaching drills with a positive and enthusiastic attitude or they can choose to be lazy and cut corners. Help your players understand that the commitments they make on a daily basis either build or erode the legacy they want to leave. One of the saddest things I see is when seniors look back on their careers with regrets. They regret not working harder during the off-seasons to improve their game. They regret not taking advantage of practices and coaches who were willing to help them. They regret not being more confident and aggressive when they stepped in the box. They regret how they cheated themselves and their team because they did not start giving it their all until it was too late. Invest the time to sit down with each player and ask her about her long-term goals and how she would like to be remembered. After you discover what she wants to achieve, help her set short-term goals to improve her skills. Then encourage her to commit to working hard on a daily basis.

2. Composure

To perform successfully, players must maintain control of themselves. Great players have the poise to handle pressure situations rather than tensing up, becoming frustrated, or playing scared. Thus, in addition to teaching your players hitting, fielding, and throwing skills, you must also teach them how to remain composed, especially under pressure. At Arizona, we use an analogy of a traffic light, originated by sport psychology consultant Ken Ravizza (Ravizza and Hanson 1995), to discuss and strengthen our team's mental game. A green light mental game means that the player is focused, confident, positive, aggressive, in the flow, and in control of herself. Mental green lights lead to players who have their heads in the game, have quality at bats, and consistently make routine plays. A yellow light mental game means that a player is frustrated, distracted, stressed, tentative, and losing control. Mental yellow lights show up on the field when a player is pressing at the plate and swings at pitches out of the strike zone; when she forgets to check the signs, runners, or number of outs; or when she tenses up and can't seem to throw a strike. Yellow lights decrease the player's chances of playing to her potential because her mental game

gets in her own way. A red light mental game means the player has lost control, is extremely angry, and is very frustrated and negative—or she may be totally apathetic and have given up. If the player is still on the field when she is in a red light, she is worried about looking foolish at the plate, praying the ball is not going to be hit to her in the field, and scared to death as a pitcher of getting hit hard. When a player is in a red light, she gives herself very little chance of playing well because her head is not positioned for success. Composure means getting the player into a green light before practices and games. It means helping her stay in a green light despite distractions, pressures, mistakes, and criticism. Mental toughness means staying in a green or quickly getting back to a green light even when it is very easy to go into a yellow or red light. We encourage players to recognise when they are slipping into a yellow light and work to mentally change it to green before allowing themselves to drop into red. Mental strategies for doing this are presented in the following sections.

3. Concentration

Concentration is another critical skill for athletes. Because focus is so important for hitting, let's examine the role it plays. Imagine this scenario: Bottom of the seventh, you're down one run, you've got runners on second and third with two outs. Would you rather have a batter at the plate who has a few mechanical flaws in her swing but who you know is mentally tough, confident, focused, aggressive, and looking forward to the opportunity to come through for the team? Or would you rather have your most mechanically sound hitter standing in the box physically, but her mind is a million miles away because it is filled with doubts, distractions, and fears? While mechanics are definitely an important aspect of softball, a poor mental game can cause them to break down, especially in pressure situations. How many times have overanxious hitters cost you games because they swing at bad pitches? How often have you seen a player freeze up and not be able to pull the trigger because her mind was too cluttered or distracted?

While you spend countless hours in the cages and on the field trying to perfect a player's swing, more often than not a weak mental game is the cause of poor at bats. The good hitter whom you see in relatively stress-free practice situations is not always the same person who shows up at game time. Rather than spending an extra 10 minutes in the cage perfecting her mechanics, perhaps your time is better invested in strengthening her mental game. What your players choose to focus on both before and during their at bats is a key factor in determining their success (Janssen and O'Brien 1997). Successful hitters learn how to focus their minds in ways that maximize their chances of being successful. To help your players have more consistent quality at bats, encourage them to focus in the following ways. Focus on the Controllables. Often players let factors they have little or no control over get into their heads and take them out of their game. Umpires are a good example. How many times have you seen a player blame an umpire's strike zone for her failures? While umpires' zones can fluctuate, your players have little to no control over their calls. Instead help your players focus on adjusting to the umpire's strike zone rather than constantly blaming and battling him or her. Convince your players it is a battle that's out of their control and one that they therefore will never win. Don't allow them (or yourself) to use terrible umpiring as an excuse for why you can't perform. Make a mental adjustment. Focus on the Present. The

most important at bat of the game is always the present one because it's the only one your players can do something about. Too often hitters drag thoughts of previous bad at bats into their present focus. Dwelling on the past only clutters their minds and divides their focus. The key is to take it one at a time, and even one pitch, at a time. One way to teach this concept is to talk about bad at bats as bricks. Just as a player would have a tough time hitting well while holding on to a brick, so too would she have a difficult time mentally hanging on to a previous at bat. Have your players let go of bad at bats by encouraging them to convert them to mental game lessons, such as thinking, the pitcher is going outside to me, so I need to go with it and drive it the opposite way.

Lessons help players focus on what they want to do right for the next time rather than dwelling on what went wrong the last time. Focus on the Positive One of the most common but easily correctable mental errors is when hitters try to negate the negative. For example, they negate the negative when they step into the box thinking, Don't strike out or don't swing at bad pitches. What hitters fail to realise when they rehearse this self-talk is that their minds have a funny way of disregarding the don't. These words actually register in their minds as Strike out and Swing at bad pitches. Since the body seeks to fulfill the wishes of the mind, have your players focus on the positive things they want to execute. Tell them (and have them tell themselves) to See the ball, Hit the ball, Hit your pitch, and Put a good swing on a good pitch. Helping your hitters focus on the positive things they want to accomplish is much more effective than focusing on the negative things they want to avoid. Focus on the Process. Being obsessed with outcomes such as batting averages is often a hitter's worst downfall. Batting averages can distract hitters so much that Arizona Coach Mike Candrea never lets his players see them (Janssen and Candrea 1994). Instead he has them focus on quality at bats where the goal is to see the ball well and hit it hard somewhere. The focus is much more on the process of successful hitting—seeing the ball well, being balanced, having relaxed hands and a calm and clear mind. If your hitters can take care of the process of successful hitting, you are much more likely to get the results you want. To help your players focus on and acknowledge the importance of the process, congratulate them when they hit the ball hard, regardless of whether it is a hit or an out in the scorebook. Our players realize the power of the process and celebrate hard hit outs as much as hits.

4. Confidence

At some time during a season, a player may find herself at the plate with the game on the line. Runners are in scoring position, and you and your team are relying on her to get the clutch hit to tie the score or get the game-winning RBI. Why do some players tighten up and fall apart under this kind of pressure, while others remain calm, cool, and collected? The answer is confidence. Believing you can be successful is more than half the battle. Ty Cobb once said, "The great hitters operate on the theory that the pitcher is more afraid of them than they are the pitcher." Your hitter must believe she has what it takes to perform in the clutch. She must convince herself that her ability to hit the ball is greater than the demands of the situation. There are four basic sources of confidence that your players can draw from to help them perform in virtually any situation both on and off the field: strengths, past successes, preparation, and

praise (Janssen 1996). By developing and reminding themselves of these four areas, your players have the mental tools necessary to cultivate and create confidence. Furthermore, one of your biggest roles as a coach is that of confidence builder (Janssen and Dale 2002). Use these four sources for building confidence to help your players create the mental toughness necessary to come through in the clutch. An effective source for building confidence is to have your players reflect on and remind themselves of their strengths. Because players are often too critical of themselves, they have a tendency to forget about the good things they can do. To help your players remember their strengths, have each player list them on a sheet of paper. Or taking this exercise a step further, have your players go around and list each other's strengths. Not only is this a great way to build a player's confidence, but it is also a good team building activity (Janssen 1999). One of the more powerful sources of confidence comes from past successes. If a player has had success in a previous similar situation, she is much more likely to feel confident when she is in the situation again. If she's done it once before, then she can do it again. Have your players list all of the great games they have had as well as their clutch hits. Reflecting on past highlights is a great way to create the confidence necessary for future successes. Quality preparation could be considered the mother of confidence. When players work hard in the cages, off the tee, in soft toss, and on the field during practice, they earn the right to feel confident during the game. Confidence is earned and built through hours of hard work and gallons of sweat. Additionally, quality preparation can take the form of studying a pitcher's tendencies, talking to teammates who have already faced her, and developing a consistent mental hitting routine. Hard work and quality preparation help your players feel like they deserve to be successful. A final source of confidence comes from praise. Have your players list the compliments and encouraging words that have been said about their games. These words might have come from teammates, parents, opponents, and most importantly you. The feedback you give your players has a tremendous effect on them, some more than others. Ask yourself and your coaching staff, "Are we building or eroding our players' confidence?" While Arizona coach Mike Candrea is an expert at the mechanics of hitting, he's perhaps better at helping players build their confidence through his positive and encouraging feedback. Remember, the level of confidence you show in a player often has a big effect on the confidence she has in herself.

5. Consistency

One of the telltale signs of being a great player is consistency. Some players may occasionally have a game or two where they play well, but the truly great players perform well on a consistent basis. It doesn't matter whether it is a scrimmage situation or the seventh inning of the national championship game of the Women's College World Series; great players are ready to do battle. How can you help your players become more consistent? The key to consistent hitting begins with proper preparation and thinking before each at bat. Proper mental preparation allows your hitters to be more focused and confident when they actually step into the box. It is this focused and confident mindset that allows your hitters to have more quality at bats. When your players can have more quality at bats, they become more consistent hitters. To help our players become more consistent hitters, we encourage them to develop a consistent mental routine before each at bat (Ravizza & Hanson 1995). This routine typically involves a certain sequence of

thoughts and actions that are done before every at bat. The primary goal of the mental routine is to help your hitter properly prepare herself and create the mindset necessary to have a quality at bat. The routine helps the player focus on the process of hitting, which if done well, maximizes her chances of getting the outcome you both want—hits. The first phase of a mental routine for hitting involves making sure that the hitter is in control of herself. A player who is not in control of herself may be dwelling on past problems or letting things outside her control take her out of her game. A player who is not in control of herself has a distracted mind and a tense body. This stressed-out mindset does not make for good hitting. Thus, the player needs to be able to control herself before she is able to control her hitting. She should assume control in the dugout before she is in the hole. If she finds herself somewhat distracted, frustrated, or tentative, she should use her time in the dugout to regain control of herself before bringing this ineffective mindset into the box with her. She can regain control by taking a deep breath and using the refocusing ideas covered in the concentration and confidence sections. The second phase of an effective mental routine is planning. The planning stage occurs as the player is on deck and until the time she steps in the box. During this time she can be watching the pitcher and timing her swings with her delivery. She also should be scanning the field so that she begins to get a feeling for what she might be called on to do for her upcoming at bat. By the end of the planning stage, your hitter should understand what she wants to accomplish with her at bat and have the confidence to do it. The final stage of an effective mental routine for hitting is trusting. Trusting means that the player has a clear mind and is focused only on the release point of the pitcher so that she can pick up the ball as early as possible and see it well. In essence, she is turning off the thinking and analyzing part of her mind and allowing herself to trust her hands to react. Most problems occur when a hitter is still thinking and analyzing when she steps into the box. Too much thinking causes a hitter to be overanxious or freeze up. A trusting mindset is the key to letting her hands (and the rest of her mechanics) react naturally. To help your hitters get into the trust mode, encourage them to take a breath before they step into the box. This breath should symbolize to them that they are emptying their mind of the thinking and analyzing and are now stepping in with a calm and clear mind. Have them fix their eyes and fine-tune their focus externally on the pitcher's thigh area, so they pick up the ball as quickly as possible. Even though I used hitting as an example, pitchers, infielders, and outfielders can also use mental routines. The key is to help your players run through a quick mental checklist to make sure that they are in control of themselves, focused on the situation, and ready to trust themselves and react naturally.