

USING YOUR HEAD TO PLAY CHAMPIONSHIP BASEBALL



A BASEBALL PLAYER'S
WORKBOOK
FOR DEVELOPING
MENTAL TOUGHNESS

DR. ALAN GOLDBERG

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INTRODUCTION

In every sport at the highest levels, the very best athletes always say the same things when they're asked about the secrets to their success. You have to develop good mechanics and proper technique. You have to have a solid tactical and strategic understanding of the game. You have to develop and maintain a superior level of physical strength and conditioning. Lastly, and surely not least, you have to have your head on straight at crunch time. What this last secret is all about is that if you want to take your game as far as possible, if you want to play at the next level, then you can't do it by simply just training the physical dimension of baseball. You also have to train mentally. You have to develop mental toughness.

Let me put it in simple terms: Do you really want to play to your potential? Do you have some big, scary dreams that you would desperately like to achieve? If so, then your success in this endeavor is at least 95% physical and 5% mental in practice. Simply put, there is no substitute for hard work and perseverance in the pursuit of your baseball dreams. You have to pay your "physical dues" in practice. There is no physical shortcut to becoming a champion. NONE! However, once you step onto



the field for a game, once you step into the batter's box at crunch time, once the pressure of competition is turned way up high in a crucial, closely fought game, then your success is now 95% mental and 5 % physical. What this means is also simple. When it comes time for the game, whether you play your best or choke your guts out depends almost entirely upon what is going on between your ears!

To become a champion, you must consistently train like one. You have to be willing to do whatever it takes physically to get yourself to the next level. There is absolutely no substitute for honest, hard work. Hanging around in front of the tube spilling snacks and soda on your face won't get you there. Cutting corners in your training and consistently dogging it whenever the coach isn't looking won't get you to the next level. You'll never reach your dreams with that kind of training behavior. Success can only become yours when your investment of physical training in practice is solid.

INTRODUCTION

However, once you get into a pressured tryout, showcase tournament or championship game situation, the physical side of your sport becomes much less important. In games, your performance is 95% mental because what goes on "upstairs" determines whether you soar with the eagles or gobble with the turkeys. Your focus of concentration, ability to handle pressure, "reboundability" from mistakes, bad at-bats, terrible calls and bad breaks, your self-confidence and mental toughness all determine whether your hard work, consistent training and skills will pay off in you playing the kind of ball that you're capable of. Simply put, without having a "good head" on your shoulders, you'll consistently fall short of your goals on the field.



All too often baseball players will do what they need to do physically in order to get good. They'll religiously work with a trainer, practice long hours in the batting cage, work

hard defensively improving the skills needed for their position in the field, perfect their sliding technique, do weight training, study the game's strategy and build up their endurance through sprints and distance running. In practice, their hard work is clearly visible. They play loose and relaxed, hitting the ball hard and consistently, and rarely make errors in the field. By game time there's no question that they are physically tough and ready.

However, for a lot of players, something happens during warm-up and the start of their game. It's as if they're starring in the re-make of that old movie, *Invasion Of The Body Snatchers*. During the game their relaxed practice game does a disappearing act. Suddenly they're playing tight and tentatively. Their swing up at the plate is unrecognizable! It's tight and tentative and their timing is way off. Their throw on defense looks awkward and they lose their accuracy. And then there's that minor problem of all those nerves inside!!!!

What gives?

To play your best when it counts the most you need more than just physical preparedness. You also need to be ready mentally. You need to be **MENTALLY TOUGH!**

If you go into your big games, important tournaments or critical tryouts **HOPING** that you'll play your best, **HOPING** that you'll impress the coaches enough to earn a starting position on the varsity, or **HOPING** that you won't embarrass yourself, then you're setting yourself up for some major heartache and disappointment. If you go into games worried about your opponents or how good the opposing pitcher is, dwelling on a previous bad game, distracted by an inconsistent warm-up or just plain doubting yourself, then you will never play to your potential.

INTRODUCTION

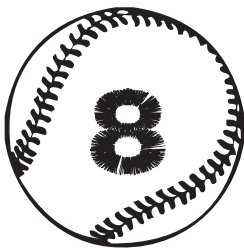




INTRODUCTION

Do **NOT** waste all of your hard physical work and training! Do **NOT** leave your mental toughness to chance. No serious baseball player would ever leave his physical training to chance. That would be totally foolhardy. So why leave such an important component, the mental dimension of your game out of the equation? Since your focus of concentration and ability to stay relaxed under pressure are absolute keys to playing well, why would you then go into a big game too nervous and focused on all of the wrong things? Well, you wouldn't if you had trained properly! To play like a champion you must systematically develop the mind of a champion. This workbook is designed to help you do just that: **TO THINK AND PERFORM LIKE A WINNER ON GAME DAY!**

The techniques, strategies and exercises found in this workbook are **GUARANTEED** to help you stay calm under pressure, concentrate like a winner, avoid psych-outs and intimidation, block out distractions, quickly leave disappointments, bad breaks, errors and poor at-bats behind you, feel confident, believe in yourself, master last minute negative thinking and self-doubts and much more! If you **WORK** these techniques and **DO** this workbook, then I can confidently guarantee that you



will significantly strengthen your level of mental toughness. If you simply read through this book once, like you would any other book, then you will find what you read to be relatively useless in the long run! Why? Simply because this is a **WORK**book, **NOT** a **READ**book. I know all the techniques and strategies that you'll find within these pages work. I've borrowed them from elite athletes in and out of your sport through the years. However, in order for you to get them to consistently work for you out on the field and up at the plate, in order for you to truly build the skills of mental toughness, you must consistently work them just like you would in mastering any other aspect of this game!

INTRODUCTION





SO HOW TOUGH ARE YOU?

So How Tough Are You?

TESTING YOUR CURRENT LEVEL OF MENTAL TOUGHNESS

So let's begin in the beginning with exactly where you are at mentally as a baseball player. Are you a mental toughness giant, or a 98lb mental toughness weakling? Let's find out. Take this very simple, mental toughness questionnaire to determine exactly where your mental strengths and weaknesses lie. Having an awareness of your present strengths, and, more important, your weaknesses is the very first important step to developing the mind of a champion. After completing your mental toughness training in this workbook I would then recommend that you retake this same questionnaire later on in the season. This will demonstrate how far you've come mentally and what other work is still needed.



A BASEBALL PLAYER'S MENTAL TOUGHNESS QUESTENAIRRE

HANDLING PRESSURE *(true/false answers)*

1. ___ I often dread playing in those bigger games/tournaments
2. ___ I think about my opponent's size, skills or reputation before I play
3. ___ Temperature, field conditions, crowd size and specific opponent(s) usually affect my performance negatively
4. ___ I look forward to the bigger games
5. ___ The tougher the competition, the better my opponent, the happier I am
6. ___ I am inwardly calm and composed before I play
7. ___ I worry a lot about striking out and/or committing errors
8. ___ I frequently hit and play better in practice than I do in big games
9. ___ I have the ability to calm myself when I'm too nervous
10. ___ I get physically sick before certain tryouts/games/tournaments
11. ___ My pre-game/at-bat self-talk is mostly negative and full of doubts
12. ___ I have trouble trusting my training and skills when it comes time to put it all on the line
13. ___ I play better against weaker opponents
14. ___ Some people on my team would call me a "headcase"
15. ___ I love playing when the game gets tight
16. ___ More often than not, I'm too nervous to play to my potential
17. ___ I seem to often worry about losing to teams who I know we're better than
18. ___ I frequently get sick or injured right before bigger games/tournaments
19. ___ I'd much rather practice than compete
20. ___ "Choking" under pressure is a close friend of mine
21. ___ I tend to play better in unimportant scrimmages vs. tournament games
22. ___ I can never seem to make my hard work and extra training pay off

SO HOW TOUGH ARE YOU?



CONCENTRATION

23. ___ I am easily distracted
24. ___ I often focus on the opponents/pitcher before the start of the game
25. ___ I often think about past poor performances before I play
26. ___ Once the game starts, I tend to focus too much on what others think of me
27. ___ I think too much when I play
28. ___ I have the ability to block out negatives & doubts before the game/my at-bats
29. ___ I usually only focus on one or two things when I play
30. ___ I tend to compare myself with my opponents/teammates during the game
31. ___ I worry a lot about letting others down
32. ___ I can easily lock my focus on the game as I play
33. ___ My mind has a tendency to drift too much before games/at-bats/plays
34. ___ I focus a lot on the outcome before and during my game
35. ___ If I have a bad warm up, I can't seem to shake it
36. ___ I mentally jump ahead of myself during the game and entertain the "what if's"
37. ___ There are certain opponents/pitchers that I can't seem to play well against
38. ___ I tend to get distracted by what others say or do before and during the game
39. ___ When I lose my focus, I can quickly bring it back
40. ___ When I play, I mostly don't think

SO HOW TOUGH ARE YOU?



SO HOW TOUGH ARE YOU?

HANDLING ADVERSITY (*Mental Rebounding*)

- 41. ___ I can't seem to shake the disappointment of an error or bad at-bat/game
- 42. ___ I have certain games during the season where I always perform poorly
- 43. ___ If my first few at-bats are bad, the rest of my hitting is usually bad
- 44. ___ I usually believe that a bad warm-up will negatively affect my play
- 45. ___ If I boot a ball in the field or strike out at the plate, it stays with me a long time
- 46. ___ Disappointments and failures motivate me to work harder
- 47. ___ I have the ability to quickly let go of my mistakes, errors and bad games
- 48. ___ If I get called out on strikes, I can't stop thinking about it
- 49. ___ When a call goes against me and it's unfair, it sticks to me like glue
- 50. ___ I believe that I learn much more from my failures than successes
- 51. ___ Injuries make me want to pack it all up and quit
- 52. ___ If I make several errors in a row, I get really discouraged
- 53. ___ Losses and setbacks make me feel like I'll never succeed
- 54. ___ With all my failures I often question why I keep playing this game
- 55. ___ I deliberately use the memory of bad games to push myself harder in practice on a daily basis
- 56. ___ When the going gets tough, I tend to quit
- 57. ___ After a loss or bad game, I look for what I can do better next time
- 58. ___ When bad things happen, I always think, "why me?"
- 59. ___ If I've been outplayed by certain teams a few times before, I tend to give up too easily when I have to play them again
- 60. ___ When I lose, there are usually correctable reasons for it.



WINNING ATTITUDE

61. ___ I tend to see the glass of milk as always “half full”
62. ___ I believe that I can do anything that I set my mind to
63. ___ I build my successes on my failures
64. ___ Other’s negativity always seems to get to me
65. ___ When I play badly, I tend to make excuses
66. ___ I hate playing on certain fields and against certain teams
67. ___ The more of my teammates I can get to play harder, the better I feel
68. ___ I love being pushed by my coach
69. ___ It really annoys me when my teammates outplay me in practice or games
70. ___ I like to pace myself through a long practice so I don’t get too tired
71. ___ It really bothers me when I see teammates cut corners
72. ___ My coach would call me a whiner
73. ___ When I play badly at a big tournament, it’s usually the field or weather conditions, my opponent or the umpire’s fault
74. ___ “Can’t” and “never” aren’t words in my vocabulary
75. ___ If I can’t be the star, there’s no point in trying hard
76. ___ I have an easy time finding things to complain about
77. ___ I am a positive person
78. ___ I tend to get threatened by other’s successes
79. ___ I live, “when the going gets tough, the tough get going”
80. ___ If you don’t have anything good to say, don’t say anything

SO HOW TOUGH ARE YOU?



Scoring: Score one point for each answer that matches the answer on this scoring key. If your answer doesn't match, assign a value of zero.

KEY

HANDLING PRESSURE	CONCENTRATION	HANDLING ADVERSITY	WINNING ATTITUDE
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- | | | | |
|-------|-------|-------|-------|
| 1. F | 23. F | 41. F | 61. T |
| 2. F | 24. F | 42. F | 62. T |
| 3. F | 25. F | 43. F | 63. T |
| 4. T | 26. F | 44. F | 64. F |
| 5. T | 27. F | 45. F | 65. F |
| 6. T | 28. T | 46. T | 66. F |
| 7. F | 29. T | 47. T | 67. T |
| 8. F | 30. F | 48. F | 68. T |
| 9. T | 31. F | 49. F | 69. F |
| 10. F | 32. T | 50. T | 70. F |
| 11. F | 33. F | 51. F | 71. T |
| 12. F | 34. F | 52. F | 72. F |
| 13. F | 35. F | 53. F | 73. F |
| 14. F | 36. F | 54. F | 74. T |
| 15. T | 37. F | 55. T | 75. F |
| 16. F | 38. F | 56. F | 76. F |
| 17. F | 39. T | 57. T | 77. T |
| 18. F | 40. T | 58. F | 78. F |
| 19. F | 59. F | | 79. T |
| 20. F | 60. T | | 80. T |
| 21. F | | | |
| 22. F | | | |

SO HOW TOUGH ARE YOU?





SCORING – MENTAL TOUGHNESS QUESTIONNAIRE

There are a total of 80 possible points that you can get on this little test. If you answer these questions honestly and score between 72-80, then you are mentally tough as nails and should be traveling around the country with me conducting mental toughness workshops. If you score between 64- 71, then you are pretty solid mentally. Scores between 56-63 indicate that you are weak mentally and scores below 55 suggest that your head is definitely getting in the way of your playing.

Examine your answers in each of the four categories listed for directions into which area of mental toughness training you need to work on improving. For example, if you score 14 out of a possible 20 on the “handling pressure” section, it would be very useful for you to spend more time on these techniques in this workbook. Keep in mind that no matter what your score, you can always strengthen your mental toughness muscles and that’s what this training program is all about.

SO HOW TOUGH ARE YOU?





SO HOW TOUGH ARE YOU?

STEP #1 DEVELOPING AWARENESS

GETTING STARTED

In order for you to learn to play your best when it counts the most, you must first develop **AWARENESS** of what you are currently doing mentally that may very well be getting in your way. You can't correct mistakes and strengthen weaknesses without knowing exactly what these are! For example, if you keep hitting the ball into the ground because there's a hitch in your swing, then you won't be able to constructively change this mechanical mistake until you become aware of exactly what you're actually doing that's causing you to hit grounders!

You started this process of developing awareness by taking the **MENTAL TOUGHNESS QUESTIONNAIRE**. Hopefully this has given you some general ideas of what exactly is getting you into hot water, performance-wise. Now let's get a bit more specific. Remember, without an awareness of your mental mistakes, you'll never be able to begin to build mental toughness. **AWARENESS IS YOUR VERY FIRST KEY TO CHANGE.**



There are three basic areas that you need to develop an awareness of in order to systematically build mental toughness:

- 1) **SELF-TALK** or what I call your **“INNER COACH.”**
- 2) **FOCUS OF CONCENTRATION**
- 3) **LEVEL OF PRE-GAME NERVOUSNESS** or **EXCITEMENT**

DEVELOPING AN AWARENESS OF YOUR “INNER COACH.”

“Games are won and lost before the start and before the final out.”

- Dr. G

Do you know what this statement means? Your pre-game and during-game/at-bat thoughts or self-talk, that is, the dialogue of what I call your “inner coach” dramatically affects how loose and relaxed you are, how well you are able to handle fatigue, your level of self-confidence and how well you’ll play. The wrong kind of “inner coaching” will tighten you up, undercut your confidence, slow you down and trip you up. So let’s discover just what kind of “inner coach” you have working for you.

STEP #1

DISCOVERING THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN YOUR GOOD & BAD GAMES:

PART 1: “THE INNER COACHING OF BAD PERFORMANCES.”

EXERCISE: *Sit down, close your eyes and mentally review, in as much detail as possible a previous bad game. Remember where the game was held, the field you played on, who your opponent was, who might have been watching, the weather, what might have been at stake, etc. Specifically, I would like you to “zoom in” on what you were thinking to yourself as you were warming up, right before the game/tournament started and*



then what you were thinking as the first game unfolded. What kind of “inner coaching” was going on? Next, recall what you were thinking about during your first at-bat or when you had to make your first play in the field. For example, what went through your mind if you walked the first two batters, took a called third strike or booted a ball and cost your team a run? What did you think if you tried to steal a base and were thrown out or if someone robbed you of a sure hit? What went on in your head if the crowd got on you or a teammate or coach yelled at you? What inner dialogue did you hear if the umpire made a bad call? Take a moment right now to jot down in as much detail as possible the answers to the questions on Worksheet #1, “Self-talk & Bad Performances.” When you’ve finished, answer the very same questions for at least two more bad games.

Now, compare your answers and see if you can discover a pattern between all of your bad outings. Usually you’ll find that right before and during your bad games, you think very similar kinds of things. Your “inner coaching” is frequently negative, confidence eroding and non-stop. Oftentimes it fills you with dread and raises your anxiety level, making it all but impossible to play the kind of loose and relaxed ball that you’re capable of.

PURPOSE: Examining several of your bad games in this way will help you come to really get to “know” your bad inner coach. Remember, before you can change negative “inner coaching” to positive, you must first become aware of your typical patterns of negativity. Once you get a handle on what you typically say to yourself both before and during your bad games, you will then be in a much better position to begin to turn this negative coaching around. However, if you have no awareness of the specific ways that you’re being negative, then you will continue to bring yourself down without any chance for constructive change.

STEP #1



STEP #1



PART 2: “THE INNER COACHING OF GOOD PERFORMANCES”

Next, pick several of your best performances, games where you were extremely satisfied with how well you played, where you were relaxed and “on.” Examining them one at a time, vividly review each great performance in relation to your “inner coaching.” What were you thinking about before the game? What were you thinking about during warm-ups? In your first at-bat? What kind of thoughts or self-talk, if any, did you have during the first inning? When things got tough or stressful what did you think? If you struck out or committed an error, what did you think? If your opponent tried playing head games with you or was deliberately being overly aggressive, what did you “hear” from your inner coach? Write down all of your typical “inner coaching” for each of these good performances and record them on Worksheet #2 “Self-talk & Good Performances.” Next, compare all three or four of these good games to see if there is a pattern of “inner coaching” that accompanies your best performances. If you’re anything like most baseball players out there, then you should be able to discover a consistent pattern here.

PART 3: “COMPARE AND CONTRAST” Finally, take the self-talk worksheets #1 and #2 that you compiled and compare them. You should begin to see a significant difference in your “inner coaching” between your best and worst performances.

WHAT DOES THIS DIFFERENCE REALLY MEAN?

Your awareness of the differences in self-talk between your best and worst games forms a critical first step in your being able to “retrain” your “inner coach.” For example, if you know the typical self-talk that always seems to accompany your worst games, as well as the self-talk that goes with your best, then you are in a position to begin to turn the negative around before it leads to another bad performance. For example, let’s say that after a

throwing error that cost your team a run, you hear things like, “How could you have blown that!?!?? God, your throw totally sucks!!!! Why is it that you always seem to play crappy when it really counts? You are a choker!” Letting this kind of negative self-talk run uninterrupted in your head will very quickly undermine your confidence, raise your stress level, tighten you up physically and completely destroy your game. This is why it is so critical that you immediately become aware of when your inner coaching turns negative like this so that you can take some steps to turn it around. Without this awareness, you are doomed to continue to sabotage yourself into playing poorly.

STEP #1





STEP #1

STEP 2

MOTIVATION: TAKING YOUR GAME TO THE NEXT LEVEL

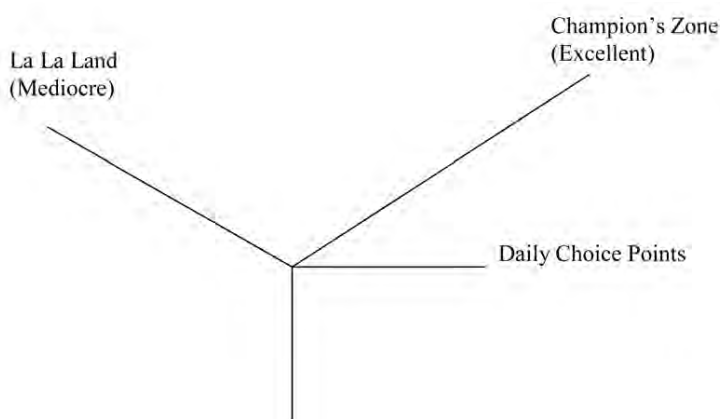
So how badly do you want it? Do you really want to take your baseball game to the next level? Are you doing everything possible in your training towards this end or are you inadvertently sabotaging yourself and holding yourself back? In other words, what is the quality of your training like? What kind of an investment are you making in your baseball future on a daily basis? Are you “depositing” gold bullion whenever you train or are you chocking up a whole bunch of wooden nickels and Monopoly money? Your future success on the field is almost completely in your hands and depends upon **HOW** you train.

So let’s start with a very basic question: “**DO YOU KNOW WHAT ROAD YOU’RE ON?**” You see, every day when you train, you’re on a road just like the one depicted in *Figure #1*. Everyday that road forks many, many times. And, as an athlete, you have a decision to make many, many times a day. What fork am I going to take? All too often baseball players make this decision over and over again and have absolutely no awareness of which road they are choosing. As a result, they end up making choices that



might not be in their best interests, choices that won't help them get to their goals.

Let's look at *Fig. #1* more closely. There are basically two different paths that you can follow in relation to baseball and your life. When you take the left fork enough times, you'll end up in a "wondrous" place I call "La La Land." If you get into the habit of taking the left fork, you'll ultimately achieve "supreme mediocrity." Simply put, you'll become unbelievably average! However, when you consistently take the right fork, you will eventually find yourself in "The Champions' Zone." The Champions' Zone is one of those places where you will be stalked by success! It will pounce on you every chance it gets. What do each of these paths actually look like?



STEP #2



Let's say that you're in the middle of practice, feeling really tired and the coach wants you to run wind sprints. As the sprints begin, you notice that the coach has stopped watching. You then think to yourself, "I'm whipped! Time to chill," and then you deliberately slow down. When you do this, whether you know it or not, you have just made a decision to take the left fork. Or perhaps your hitting isn't nearly as strong as it could be, and you know you should be spending more time in the batting cage working on it. However, it's no fun to practice something that you're not good at, so you allow yourself to get easily frustrated

when you work on it and then cut your practice sessions short every chance you get! That decision, every time you make it, helps send you down the left fork. Or maybe your friends want you to go party with them on a night before a big weekend series and you know you shouldn't go, that you need the sleep and you should be resting your legs and body. However, you don't want to miss out on all of the fun so you go anyway. Guess what road you're on with that decision? You bet! You've just taken that left fork to La La Land again.

Now it's obvious what the right road would be in each of these instances. When you're in the middle of doing sprints and your body is screaming for mercy, you think, "this is my chance to lift the level of my conditioning and whole game," and so you go even harder. When your coach suggests that you work more on your swing you think, "I know that this is the one thing that's really holding me back from becoming a really strong player," and so you put the time into strengthening that weakness. When your buddies want to stay out late and party you think, "Yeah, it would be really fun to do that, but how I play this weekend is much more important to me," and so you apologize to them and don't go, regardless of all the crap that they might heap on you!

Let me ask you an obvious question here: Which is the easier road to take? The road to La La Land of course! It takes no character, discipline or special effort to take the left fork, which is exactly why so many baseball players do so. The right fork to the Champions' Zone is a far more difficult one. When you go the right way, you end up having to sacrifice. You have to continuously push yourself outside of your comfort zone. The right fork is more frustrating and involves setbacks and failures. The road to the Champions' Zone takes much longer and involves real suffering. So another question readily arises:

Why should anyone in their right mind bother consistently

STEP # 2



taking the right road? Why put yourself through all that suffering, aggravation and hardship? Isn't it so much easier just to go down the left fork and not have to work up a sweat.

How you answer this question is absolutely critical for you as an athlete. You can say that you'll take the right road because it's more rewarding or it'll make you feel much better about yourself or you'll accomplish far more in your life. You can say that with the right road ultimately you'll become successful. All these answers are true.

However, you'll take the right fork, the right road for **ONE MAIN REASON! YOU WANT TO!** You'll take the right road if **YOU** have an emotionally compelling reason to. There has to be something down that right fork that **YOU** really want, that's really important to **YOU**. You can't take the right fork because it's just the right thing to do. You can't take it because you have a lot of talent and it will please your parents if you do so. You can't take it for the coaches. You have to do it because **YOU WANT IT!**

In other words you have to have what I call a "**BIG ENOUGH WHY,**" some personal goal, dream or mission that has captured your heart and imagination and provides you with ample enough reason to sacrifice, work hard, and do whatever it takes to become successful. Your **BIG ENOUGH WHY** can be trying to break into the starting line-up on varsity, to become the #1 pitcher on the team or to make an All-Star team or a national squad. Your **BIG ENOUGH WHY** could even be to play in college, earn a college scholarship to a D-1 program or even make it to the **BIGS!!**

STEP #2



With a "**BIG ENOUGH WHY**" that truly belongs to **YOU** and no one else, it will be much easier for you to make the right choices when you get to that crossroad. In fact, it's when you're at the crossroad and being emotionally pulled down the left fork that you need that "**Big Enough Why**" the most.

If you can consistently remind yourself of why you're training whenever the going gets really rough, then you'll get tough and keep on going in the right direction. It's the thought of your big goal or dream in practice that will help you stay motivated and on track. In fact, you want to be able to consistently ask yourself in practice, "How is what I'm doing today and right now going to help me get to my goal?"

HOW IS WHAT I'M DOING TODAY AND RIGHT NOW GOING TO HELP ME GET TO MY GOAL?

This question will help you raise the quality and intensity of your training. It will give your practices both a meaning and purpose. It will help you take responsibility for your training and cut down on those times where you just seem to be going through the motions out there. It will help you learn and improve faster. Ultimately, this question will help you turn your baseball dreams into a reality. You don't want to be out-to-lunch when you train. Keeping your "BIG WHY" in mind during practice will always insure that you're not!

Let me tell you a personal story about how my **BIG ENOUGH WHY** in my sport, tennis was first born. I was a pretty decent athlete with good hand and eye coordination that I had honed on the ping pong table in my basement. When I was 12, I took those skills to the tennis court and began playing against my friends. After a summer of being able to beat up on all of my tennis friends, none of whom had ever played seriously or had formal training, I got it in my head that I should enter a local tournament.

In the first round of this, my very first tournament, I was matched up against a real tennis player, 2 years my senior. In less than 30 minutes he beat me 6-0, 6-0, running me around like I was a wind-up toy, corner to corner, baseline to net and back. I don't think I even won a point in this mis-

STEP #2



“match” and afterwards I looked like I had just been run over by a Mack truck. I was exhausted, soaking wet with sweat, totally disheveled with bloodied knees from the few times I had fallen trying to retrieve some of my opponents shots. My opponent, on the other hand looked like he had just come out for a photo shoot. There wasn't a bead of perspiration anywhere on his face and not a single hair was out of place.

However, there was one thing that I found especially upsetting. I didn't care that I had lost so badly. I didn't care that I hadn't won a point. I didn't even care that I might have looked like an idiot in the process. What I **DID** care about was that for the entire 28 minutes of this match, he had been making fun of me with a friend who had been watching our match from behind the fence. They were laughing and joking about how badly I played, just loud enough for me to get the gist of what was going on.

I was very small as a 12 year old and had learned the hard way that small people really need to keep their mouths shut. So when I went up to him to shake his hands after the match, he smiled at me, looked me straight in the eyes and said, “That was a great match you just played!” Now, of course, he was being a condescending you-know-what. So as I shook his hand, I thought to myself; “I don't care what it takes....I don't care how long it takes...I don't care how hard I have to work....**YOU ARE MINE!!!** I will own you!”

Behold the birth of a **BIG ENOUGH WHY**, born out of fantasies of revenge and retribution! For the rest of that summer, I played tennis 12 hours a day, every day! When it was raining and most intelligent people were inside, I would hit for hours against a backboard. When school started, I would come home, do my homework and then go to the courts. I even began to take lessons, where I discovered to my great dismay just how bad a tennis player I really was! In the winter when it was

STEP #2



too cold to be outside, I'd head to the indoor courts, do my homework and then hit with anyone I could until the place closed.



One year later, in the very same tournament, I got to play that same condescending player again. This time the match lasted 45 minutes. This time the score was still 6-0, 6-0. And this time, my older and bigger opponent still beat me. After one whole year I had improved so it took him just a little longer to dispatch me and in this match, I actually won a few points! By this time, my need for revenge had all but disappeared. I had fallen in love with the game and wanted to get as good as I possibly could. Towards this end, I continued to train as if tennis was the very most important thing in my life (which, back then, it actually was!).

The very next July, two years after my original drubbing, I faced this guy for the third time, again in this same local tournament. I beat him 6-1, 6-1, totally frustrating him in the process. From that day on, I indeed owned him and he never got more than a few games from me whenever we played after that!

STEP #2



So just what road are YOU on whenever YOU practice? Are you motivated to head to the Champion's Zone or do your interests lie in exploring the hills and dales of La La Land? Answer the following questions to find out: Use True (T) or False (F) answers.

1. I have a clear "Big Enough Why" in baseball
2. I think about my big goal at least once or twice a day during practice
3. I am frequently bored in practice and often don't see the point of what I'm doing
4. I have a purpose/something specific that I want to work on in each practice that I attend
5. I frequently have a tough time getting up for practice
6. I usually ease back a bit whenever I get tired in training
7. I regularly put in extra time outside of practice to work on my weaknesses and strengthen my strengths
8. I don't have a specific BIG WHY other than I love this game and want to get as good as possible
9. My motto is "if it hurts in practice, it's just not worth doing."
10. I don't see the point in practicing hard if I'm never going to be the best..
11. When the going gets rough, I go harder
12. I'd much prefer to hang out with my friends than train
13. I find myself thinking about my baseball goals outside of practice
14. I can always find something positive to get out of even the most boring of practices
15. I often question why I'm playing this game

STEP #2



SCORING & INTERPRETATION:

KEY

1. T = 1 point
2. T = 1 “
3. F = 1 “
4. T = 1 “
5. F = 1 “
6. F = 1 “
7. T = 1 “
8. T = 1 “
9. F = 1 “
10. F = 1 “
11. T = 1 “
12. F = 1 “
13. T = 1 “
14. T = 1 “
15. F = 1 “

There are a total of 15 points that you can get as a high score. The higher your score, the more directed and motivated you are in your pursuit of the Champion's Zone. Scores between 12 and 15 indicate that you are making excellent use of training and are almost consistently taking the right fork. Scores between 8 and 11 indicate that your motivation is a bit off and you're not getting the most out of practice that you could. Scores between 4 and 7 indicate that you are seriously holding yourself back because of your focus in practice and attitude about baseball. Scores lower than 4 indicate that you are a "tour guide" for La La Land and suggest that you might want to take up another sport.

STEP #2



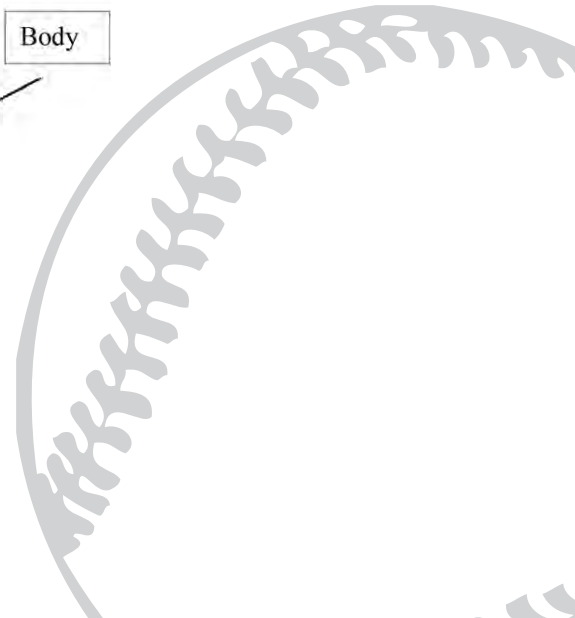
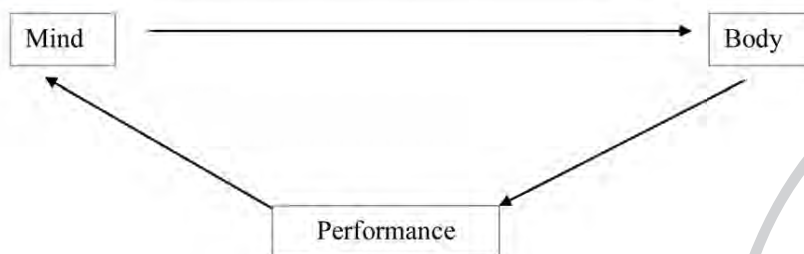


STEP #2

STEP 3

UNDERSTANDING THE MIND, BODY, PERFORMANCE CONNECTION

Games are won and lost before the start and finish, (batters strike out or crush the ball before the pitch is thrown; defensive plays are made or booted before the crack of the ball on the bat), because of the interrelationship between your mind, body and performance. In other words, what you think or say to yourself right before and during your games/at-bats/plays in the field goes instantly and directly into your body and touches off some subtle physiological changes. These small physical changes, in turn, significantly affect how well you'll play. (see figure #2).



MIND: WHAT ARE THE WRONG THINGS TO THINK OR SAY TO YOURSELF BEFORE OR DURING A GAME/AT-BAT/PLAY?

Take a moment now to carefully review your pre- and during game self-talk for all your bad performances. These represent the **WRONG** things to be thinking about. For example, “I have to get a hit!” “What if I choke?” “What if I strike out again?” “I can’t believe I dropped that ball! I don’t even belong on this team with play like that!” “I can’t **EVER** seem to hit well against him!” “My dad/mom are going to be so upset with me if I don’t get a hit!” These are all thoughts that will set you up for failure. Why? Because these pre and during game thoughts distract you from the task at hand and worse, make you incredibly **NERVOUS!**

BODY: WHAT HAPPENS IN YOUR BODY WHEN YOU GET NERVOUS?

First, and big time devastating, your muscles begin to tighten.
Second, your breathing speeds up and gets shallower.
Third, digestion shuts down leaving you feeling nauseous or queasy.
Fourth, your hands and feet get cold as your blood flow is diverted away from the extremities.
Fifth, your heart rate and blood pressure go up.

STEP #3

PERFORMANCE: HOW IS YOUR PLAY NEGATIVELY AFFECTED BY THESE PHYSICAL CHANGES?

TIGHT MUSCLES – Slow your reaction time down; Slow your foot and bat speed down. Cause you to stop moving to the ball; Shorten your reach in the field and shorten your swing up at the plate. Disrupt your feel of the ball; throw you off rhythm and timing; Kill your throwing accuracy; Shorten your throw/follow-through; Distract your focus from the play of the game; Tire you out quicker; Make you more vulnerable to injuries; Insure that you will feel the pain and fatigue of oxygen debt much



more intensely once you get into those later innings; **ALL OF THESE ADDING UP TO YOU HITTING, FIELDING AND RUNNING TO ONLY A FRACTION OF YOUR POTENTIAL!!!!!!!** Playing with tight muscles is like trying to drive a car with the emergency brake engaged! You'll go **NOWHERE** fast!

FASTER AND SHALLOWER BREATHING - Tightens your muscles even more; Throws your rhythm further off; Interferes with your normal breathing cycle; Totally and absolutely kills your endurance and makes you feel like you're completely out of shape; Makes it more difficult to quickly recover from one play to the next; Further distracts you from maintaining the right game focus; Makes it impossible to think clearly and accurately react to various game situations, **ALL OF THESE ADDING UP TO A SUPREMELY AWFUL GAME!!!!!!!**

COLD HANDS AND FEET – Make it that much more difficult to get a good feel of the ball and bat, so your throwing, fielding and hitting will always be off. Playing good baseball is all about feel and touch, and when your hands get cold, you lose it big time!!!

EXERCISE: “USING YOUR IMAGINATION TO DEMONSTRATE THE MIND POWER OF YOUR “INNER COACH.”

Try the following exercise to get a “hands on” feel for the power that your “inner coach” can wield. Stand up with your feet shoulder width apart. Take both arms and raise them so that they are perpendicular to your body, shoulder height, palms facing each other and approximately shoulder width apart. Take your left palm and rotate the palm only so that it is facing up. Next, make sure that your right thumb is pointing straight up. Next, close your eyes and imagine, in as much detail as possible that in your left hand you have a very heavy book like a Webster’s unabridged dictionary. Imagine that attached to your right thumb is a string. Attached to that string is a rather large balloon and that balloon is

STEP #3



filled with helium, a gas that rises. Repeat to yourself 3 times, very slowly “my left arm is getting heavier and heavier and falling.” Now repeat three times, “my right arm is getting lighter and lighter and rising.” As you do this try to really imagine the book and balloon in your hand and feel their affect. Then a second time, very slowly repeat three times, “my left arm is getting heavier and heavier and falling,” followed very slowly by, “my right arm is getting lighter and lighter and rising.” Finally, slowly repeat these same phrases three more times.

PURPOSE: What you think right before and during your at-bats or right before and during a play/pitch will have a tremendous impact on how you end up feeling physically and emotionally and therefore, how well you’ll perform. Did you notice that your left hand and arm felt much heavier or more tired than the right? If you did, you were able to create a real, physical state (heaviness or tension in that left arm) just by using your imagination. So just what kind of “inner coaching” have you been providing yourself? Are you programming things into your head that get you to reach higher and achieve your goals like that right arm? Or, like the left arm, is your “inner coaching” weighing you down and spoiling your game?

STEP #3

For example, are you telling yourself positive stuff like: “I’ve always been able to hit him,” “I feel good today,” “I love this field,” “My throw feels strong and powerful!” “This is going to be a really fun game!,” “I like playing when it’s this windy!” Or, are you telling yourself negative stuff like: “We never play well against this team!” “I haven’t hit well in three games!” “This umpire is totally blind!” “I hope I don’t make any more errors today!” “I’m going to strike out, I can just feel it!” “What if I walk him and let up another run?!!”



STEP 4

CHANGING NEGATIVE INNER COACHING TO POSITIVE

If you don't already know it just yet, **NOTHING GOOD EVER COMES FROM BEING NEGATIVE! NOTHING!** When you consistently put yourself down after an error or bad at-bat, or continually catch yourself doing things wrong, then the only "good" you'll do for yourself is to kill your self-confidence and tighten your muscles. I don't have to tell you that there's nothing positive in being negative in that way!!!! Imagine your team is down 4-1 with one out in the bottom of the 9th inning of a must-win game. Tell me. How will being negative and down on your situation help you to come back and win? That's a Duhhhh! You know it won't! Being negative in this situation will only serve to end the game before the final out! You can only erase a deficit and come back by maintaining a positive, never-say-die attitude. Simply put, you have to learn to systematically retrain your "inner coach" so that she becomes more positive and supportive. Here's how:

#1 KEEPING A NEGATIVITY LOG

Spend at least one week as an "investigative reporter." Who are you going to investigate? YOU and your negative "inner coach." Each night, jot down all the negative things that you said to yourself that



day both at school and on the field in practice. As you got ready for practice, what negatives did you feed yourself? As you went through your fielding and hitting, what negatives were bopping around “upstairs?” When you struck out, dropped an easily catchable fly ball or committed a throwing error, what comments did your inner coach make? If your coach got angry with you for something, what was the response from that inner critic? Without editing or attempting to “be positive,” try to allow these typical negative thoughts to flow. However, be sure to sit down that very night and record each and every one of these negative thoughts. You may be surprised to find that just by deliberately paying attention to how negative you are for an entire week, you’ll actually begin to naturally cut down on some of this.

#2 USING A “VICTORY LOG” TO BREAK THE NEGATIVITY HABIT

After spending some time getting to really “know” your “negative inner coach,” let’s start to train a more positive one. Negativity is nothing more than a bad habit. For most of us it’s much easier and more familiar to be negative than it is to be positive. Right **NOW** it’s time to stop giving in to this self-destructive temptation! Starting today, I want you to keep a journal of all your small “victories.” Whatever you did that day that was even a little positive should get recorded. For example, if you normally hold yourself back during wind sprints and instead you went all out, then record that. If you have a tendency to avoid working on your weaknesses and today you did some work on moving to your right while fielding, then record that too. If you are inconsistent up at the plate and in today’s scrimmage you managed to hit the ball hard 4-5 at-bats, then record that! If

the coach said something positive to you about your effort, attitude, focus or game, then that should get in there as well. If you were working on your bunt and you even managed to lay down a few decent ones, then record that as well. As you look for these small victories, it is critical that you **IGNORE** that negative part of you that may be saying, “Ohhh, isn’t

STEP #4



that cute, you actually managed to hit the ball on the bat when the pitch was thrown over the plate!” **DON’T CENSOR THE POSITIVE! NO VICTORY IS TOO SMALL.**

WHEN WILL YOU NEED YOUR “VICTORY LOG?”

You should spend time daily recording at least 10-15 little victories. If you come up with more, GREAT! Your victory log will provide you with a helpful perspective when things aren’t going well. Whenever baseball players go through rough patches in their training or career, they tend to forget that they ever accomplished anything positive. It’s during these tougher times that your victory log will provide you with a much needed, more positive perspective.

IMPORTANT NOTE: Use your victory log daily for at least 30 days. Turning a bad habit around and developing a new one usually takes about a month. However, my suggestion is that you get in the habit of using your victory log as a regular part of your training all year long. It will only take you a few minutes every evening to make your entries and this small investment of time will pay off huge dividends later.

#3 ELIMINATE THE “C” WORD TO BUILD CONFIDENCE

The biggest confidence drain to your competitive performance is **COMPARISON**. When you compare yourself to teammates or opponents right before that big tryout or game you will be setting yourself up for failure big time! When you play the “comparison game” you’ll **ALWAYS** lose! First of all, what others are doing is **TOTALLY** irrelevant to what **YOU** are doing. Second, comparisons ignore or discount your strengths, accomplishments and unique gifts. Third, the athlete who compares himself to a teammate or opponent is most often using the worst part of his imagination to evaluate himself. Why? Because our internal view of a teammate or opponent is usually skewed so that he always looks much faster, stronger or more skilled than we do. Think about **YOU** and

STEP #4



YOUR training. Think about **YOUR** strengths and **YOUR** game. Forget about what your teammates or opponents are doing. In the end, they are basically irrelevant to you, your goals and how well you'll play. To help you blow the whistle on comparisons and end this confidence killing habit, spend a week or two logging your comparison thoughts on paper. Like with the "negativity journal," keep a record of all your comparison thoughts at games, tryouts, practices and in school. You may be completely surprised to finally become aware of just how much comparing you're currently doing. Remember, **AWARENESS** is the very first step to change. To be able to put an end to the comparison habit you want to become exquisitely aware of exactly how and how often you're doing it.

#4 "MAKE LEMONADE"

"When life gives you lemons, make lemonade out of them!" This old adage instructs you to take the bad things that happen to you during your baseball career and "reframe" them in a more positive way. When you get in the habit of looking for the solution in the problem, sooner or later you'll discover that you'll get much further as an athlete and individual. Dwelling on problems will always keep you stuck in them. Reframing these same problems by looking for solutions will get you back on track and in the fast lane again. Examples of reframes: Your teammate and best friend beat you for the starting position behind the plate and it's starting to make you upset. Reframe = My friend is challenging me to work harder and re-dedicate myself to the game. This is an opportunity to take my catching to the next level. The opposing pitcher is a D-I recruit and I'm feeling intimidated having to face him. Reframe = This is a wonderful opportunity for me to work on keeping my composure and concentration, and to get a chance to practice playing at the next level like I want to! Your team has to play the #1 seed in the conference tournament and everyone is feeling totally psyched out. Reframe = This is yet another opportunity to

STEP #4



both challenge myself and lift the level of my game because better players can always teach you far more than weaker ones. You had a disappointing game where you went o’fer and committed two errors in the field and you’re starting to get down on yourself. Reframe = You learn more from failures than you do from successes. I know I really need to work on my weakness of getting too nervous and tight under pressure so I can play better next time.

EXERCISE: *Take the following problems and reframe them, and then begin practicing this mental skill on a daily basis:*

You have never beaten this team before.

Reframe =

Large crowd with college coaches watching.

Reframe =

You have to play a team of notorious trash talkers.

Reframe =

You have to play in terribly windy, cold conditions.

Reframe =

You have a critical at-bat and you’re suddenly afraid of choking.

Reframe =

You feel like you didn’t get enough time to properly warm up.

Reframe =

A teammate who has always played behind you has now taken your starting spot in the line-up,

Reframe =

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In practice, the coach seems to be harder on you than everyone else. Reframe =

#5 TURN NEGATIVES INTO POSITIVES

Negativity is a nasty habit that will undercut your confidence and sabotage your game. It is always in your best interests as an athlete to begin to develop the much better habit of being positive. Understand that **NOTHING GOOD COMES FROM BEING NEGATIVE!** When you hear your negative self speaking up in practice or the week leading up to a big game or crucial series, don't take him seriously enough to listen. Instead get in the habit of substituting 4- 5 positive things. Imagine how you would end up feeling if every time you had a negative thought, it was instantly followed by 4- 5 positive ones. For example, "He's much too good a pitcher, how can I possibly hit him?" can be followed by: "He may be fast and have good stuff, but I've been hitting consistently well for the last several months, I have quick hands and am getting the bat around so much better than I did last season. I'm also much stronger from all my weight training! Plus, I'm fast on the bases and that can help me get on base against him!" Remember, when you first try to turn negatives into positives, you can count on part of you **NOT** believing the positive messages. Understand that it is **NOT** important whether you believe these positives in the beginning. It is only important that you get in the habit of immediately replacing any and all negatives with 4-5 positive thoughts. It also doesn't matter if some of your positive thoughts are on the humorous side. For example: "We've never beaten them before" can be followed by: "I absolutely love playing this game, the better the opponent, the more fun! My mental training has been going really well and I think this pitcher we're facing is a real head case. And let's not forget how stylish we look in these new uniforms!!!"

STEP #4



EXERCISE: *At home, take 4 of your typical pre-game negative thoughts and for each negative statement, come up with 4-5 positive thoughts. Remember, you don't necessarily have to believe these positive statements in the beginning. If you keep using this strategy of turning a negative thought into multiple positive ones, within a few short weeks you'll find yourself in the habit of being positive.*

#6 USING AFFIRMATIONS

Another powerful tool for systematically turning around a negative attitude and building confidence (**IN BETWEEN GAMES**) is by getting in the habit of using **AFFIRMATIONS**. An affirmation is a **POSITIVE STATEMENT THAT YOU MAKE ABOUT YOURSELF AS IF IT IS TRUE RIGHT NOW**. For example, if you consistently get upset with yourself whenever you make an error, your affirmation might be, "I quickly and easily let go of my mistakes and bad-at-bats." If you tend to get much too nervous before your bigger games/tryouts, your affirmation might be, "I'm cool and calm in the clutch. The bigger the game, the better I play." If you tend to be negative under pressure then your affirmation could be, "I stay positive **NO MATTER WHAT!**"

When used correctly, affirmations form powerful bridges between how you feel **NOW** and how you would like to feel in the **FUTURE**. Your affirmations should be written on index cards and posted all around your room so that you see them continuously throughout the day. Carry some in your schoolbooks. Put some in your locker. Have some in your bat bag. Like positive statements, it is not necessary that you believe your affirmations in the beginning. It is only important that you make a point out of looking at these positive statements over and over again throughout the day.

#7 AFFIRMATIONS AND THE PRESLEEP TECHNIQUE

One effective way to get your affirmations into your uncon-

STEP #4



scious and muscle memory is to use the “pre-sleep technique.” Take one particular affirmation that you’re working on at the moment, i.e. “I stay cool and calm in the clutch” and repeat it to yourself slowly as you lie in bed at night with the lights off. After the first repetition, try to imagine, in as much detail as possible, experiencing yourself doing just that, being up at the plate in a crucial, late inning at-bat with the tying run on second and maintaining your focus and composure and then getting a hit. Slowly repeat your affirmation a second time, once again imagining yourself staying focused and composed under these pressured situations. Continue this sequence of slowly repeating your affirmation with the accompanying imagery a total of 15 - 20 times before you fall asleep. If you find that you only get through 10 repetitions before sleep overtakes you, don’t worry. Continue this technique every night before bed.



STEP #4



#8 MASTERING LAST MINUTE NEGATIVE THOUGHTS AND SELF-DOUBTS

Far too many baseball players get knocked off balance before and during their games by last minute negative

thoughts and self-doubts. They get “emotionally hijacked” so-to-speak by these negatives, letting their fears and worries run away with their confidence, focus and, as a consequence, good play.

IT IS ABSOLUTELY CRITICAL FOR YOU TO UNDERSTAND THAT YOU CAN STILL HAVE THE GAME OF YOUR LIFE EVEN IF YOU ARE FLOODED BY LAST MINUTE DOUBTS OR NEGATIVITY! How is this possible?

First, you must understand that **LAST MINUTE DOUBTS AND NEGATIVE THINKING ARE ABSOLUTELY NORMAL**. Even the very best players in this game, at every level right up into the **BIGS** sometimes entertain these thoughts right before or even during their big games. However, they have figured out that **YOU CAN STILL PLAY THE GAME OF YOUR LIFE WITH LAST MINUTE NEGATIVES BOPPING AROUND INSIDE YOUR CRANIUM**. The trick is not to allow yourself to get caught up with them. How do you do this? You must train yourself to use the negative thinking and self-doubts as neutral signals to simply **RELAX AND REFOCUS ON THE TASK AT HAND**. For example, if you’re ready for the game’s start and you hear yourself thinking, “what if I can’t hit this pitcher?” or “what if I make another throwing error?”, you want to quickly and calmly shift your focus back to what you might normally be doing right before your game, i.e. stretching, warming up, etc. If you’re about to bat and you hear, “You’re going to strike out, I just know it!” you want to notice the thought and quickly and calmly return your focus to your pre- at-bat ritual.

THIS IS ABSOLUTELY CRITICAL FOR PEAK PERFORMANCE UNDER PRESSURE!!!!

At crunch time you **NEVER** want to engage, debate or fight with the negative thoughts and doubts. At game time you don’t even want to try to be positive! That’s right! When you’re in the on-deck circle in a must hit situation, you

STEP #4



don't ever want to try to turn your negative thoughts around into positives! Why? If you start thinking, "I'm being negative, I've got to be positive" then **YOU ARE THINKING** and, as a result, you will immediately distract yourself from the pitcher's release point and the ball. You can't play good ball by thinking or coaching yourself through the game. You have to let go of bat at-bats, errors and questionable umpire calls. Playing like a champion is all about relaxing and trusting your instincts and your game. Therefore any time your mind is throwing out negatives, you want to notice them in a relaxed manner and then immediately shift your focus to what is happening on the field in that moment!

Here's a metaphor for dealing with any assault by negative thinking and self-doubts. When these last minute negatives begin to "attack" you, you want to respond as if you were an Aikido master. Aikido is a "soft" martial art where the practitioner meets an assault by utilizing the attacker's own force and momentum to effortlessly neutralize him. The fighter skilled in Aikido may, for example, quickly slip to one side, grab his attacker's wrist and twist it in just such a way as to completely and immediately render his assailant powerless. Rather than letting yourself get caught up in fighting with your own negativity, you want to effortlessly side step those thoughts by **REFOCUSING ON THE TASK AT HAND**. If the negatives persist, then again, refocus without emotionally engaging them.

STEP #4

Let me give you a specific example of exactly what I'm talking about by not engaging your negative thinking while you're in the middle of a game/at-bat:



Let's say that I'm about to hit in the late innings of a crucial game and as I step into the batter's box, I hear a little voice in my head, conscious mind saying, "You're gonna strike out! You're gonna make the last out! I just know it!" Now I have three options here, the first two demonstrate what you

don't want to do, engaging the negative thinking by fighting it with more positive thoughts. The third option demonstrates what I mean by using the thinking as a neutral signal to relax and refocus.

Engaging thinking #1 – I call time, step out of the batter's box and start talking to myself. "No, I won't strike out! I'm gonna get a hit! I'm gonna crush the ball! I'm gonna drive that runner home!" By fighting with my inner negative chatter in this way, I end up tightening my hands and arms up, over-swinging and hitting a slow dribbler back to the pitcher.

Engaging thinking #2 – I call time, step out of the box and respond to my negative thoughts with a scared, "Oh God! I better make sure I don't strike out! This is a big at bat and I really, **REALLY** need to come through for the team." Unfortunately this response leaves me nervous, physically tight and tentative. As a result, instead of swinging at the perfect pitch right over the plate, I take it for a called third strike because I'm so afraid of screwing up!

Using negative thinking as a neutral signal to relax and refocus – I hear the thoughts, call time and step out of the box. I then refocus my concentration on my breathing and slow myself down. As I step back into the box I put my concentration on my pre-bat ritual of setting my feet, taking a slow deep breath and then taking two half-speed swings while I look at the pitcher. As I do, I begin to put my focus on the feel of quick, loose hands, exactly how I feel when I'm hitting well. As I do this, I narrow my concentration to the pitcher, his release point and then the ball.

#9 USE HUMOR

Another strategy you might try (only use before a game, in the dugout or in the field when there are long breaks in the action. For example, the days leading up to a big game/ tryout, the night before or a few hours before the game)

STEP #4



is to greet your typical negative thoughts and doubts with humor. For example, right before that all important tryout you hear, “you’re going to blow it, I can just feel it! You’re going to choke your guts out and not make the team.” Instead of engaging those thoughts by thinking, “**NO I’m NOT!**” or “Stop thinking that! That’s being negative. I have to be positive!” you might quickly think “Gee, that was really helpful! Thanks so much for sharing” or “A thought for you my little friend. I’m just about to play in this game. Perhaps you may want to get yourself a beverage and a snack, and I’ll chat with you when I’m done!” When you use humor on yourself in response to these last minute negatives, you neutralize the emotional reaction so common to them and therefore you end up staying calm and relaxed, both of which are absolutely critical to your playing your best when it counts the most.

YOUR BRAIN AND PEAK PERFORMANCE

While we’re on this topic of thinking, it is absolutely critical that you as an athlete understand that one of the main differences between playing your best and choking your guts out lies in the part of the brain that you’re in as you perform. That is, when you’re at your best, in the “zone,” you are functioning from your **HIND BRAIN** and when you struggle, performance-wise, you’re stuck in your **FRONT BRAIN**. Let me explain:

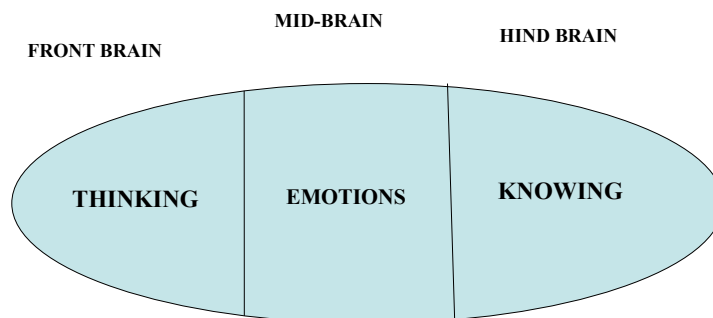
As you can see in this side view depicting the human brain, it’s broken into three parts: **THE FRONT BRAIN; MID-BRAIN; and HIND BRAIN**. Each part of your brain controls different functioning in your life, on and off the field. The **FRONT BRAIN’S** job is **THINKING**. If you are thinking about how good your opponent is before the game, yelling at yourself for committing that error and reminding yourself about what you need to do to technically correct your mistake, (i.e. “you need to keep your glove down and you need to cut off those kinds of balls! Plus you’re rushing

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your throw too much....you need to take your time!”), then you are in your **FRONT BRAIN** because our front brain controls **THINKING**.

HUMAN BRAIN



The **MID-BRAIN** controls **EMOTIONS** and the **HIND BRAIN** controls **KNOWING**. The “knowing” that I’m talking about here isn’t IQ or intellectual knowledge. It’s the knowing that comes from doing, the knowing that comes from experience. For example, you know how to walk, talk, ride a bike, etc. All of the things that you have been doing over and over again for a long time get turned over to the control of your Hind Brain.

To understand the difference between when you play well and when you struggle, between your best and worst games, we’re going to briefly look at how your **FRONT BRAIN** and **HIND BRAIN** work or “process” information. We will leave the **MID-BRAIN** out of this discussion.

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FRONT BRAIN

conscious
 uses words/sentences
 analytical
 judgmental
 extremely slow

HIND BRAIN

unconscious
 images & muscle memory
 coordinates the whole
 non-judgmental
 instantaneous

The above table depicts the processing differences between your **FRONT** and **HIND** brains. Let me explain this in understandable English. When you are in your **FRONT BRAIN** and **THINKING**, this part of your brain processes things **CONSCIOUSLY**. All this means is that when you are in your Front Brain, you are **AWARE** of the processing because you can hear yourself thinking. For example, after you boot an easy ground ball which costs your team a two-run lead, you can hear yourself thinking, “God! How could you have done that! What is wrong with you?!!! If we lose, it’ll be all **YOUR** fault!”

Front Brain processing **USES WORDS AND SENTENCES**. We think in words and sentences, one sentence after another in a linear fashion. This is the language of your Front Brain. Front Brain processing is **ANALYTICAL**. That is, your front brain tends to break things down into component pieces. It would be like having a swing or position coach instructing you as you get ready to hit or field. “OK, now keep your weight back. Be sure that you have quick hands. Get the barrel of the bat moving forward. Keep your swing level. Keep your eyes on the ball. Remember to keep your head down as you swing. Don’t try to pull the outside pitches. Just go with them”, etc. etc. Front Brain processing is like having a 100 piece puzzle in front of you, but you only see one piece at a time, separate from all the other pieces.

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Front Brain processing is **JUDGMENTAL**. That is, your Front Brain is a critic who is continually evaluating you. i.e. “That was a great play!” “Wonderful throw! I loved how it bounced three times before it got to first base!” “I can’t believe you



took that pitch! What is wrong with you?” “How could you have dropped that ball?!” “I can’t believe you are playing so badly today!” “You shouldn’t even be starting!” etc.

Because your Front Brain processes this way, consciously, using words and sentences, and breaking things down into their component pieces, Front Brain processing is **WICKED SLOW!!!!** That is, you can only process as fast as you can think, one sentence after another. Imagine trying to hit an opposing pitcher’s 85mph fastball and trying to coach yourself through all the technical things that you must do in order to get a hit! You wouldn’t get one word out in the first instructional sentence before the ball was caught by the catcher!

Now let’s look at how your Hind Brain works. **HIND BRAIN** processing goes on **UNCONSCIOUSLY**. That is, when you’re in your Hind Brain you are **NOT AWARE** of it. When you walk down the street, you don’t think about your walking technique or whether you’re lifting your knees high enough! When you make a reflex catch off of a screaming line drive,

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you don't think about how to move to catch the ball and where to put your glove. You just react and your reaction is totally outside of your conscious awareness.

Hind Brain processing uses **IMAGES AND MUSCLE MEMORY**. The language of your Hind Brain consists of pictures and body feel. Muscle memory is what you develop as an athlete from hours upon hours of practicing the same skills and movements over and over again.

Hind Brain processing is the opposite of analytical. Instead of breaking things down into their component pieces, your Hind Brain takes all the pieces and **COORDINATES THEM INTO A WHOLE**. Everything that goes into making a diving stop at shortstop and then jumping up to nail the streaking runner at first for the out, the timing, coordination, reflexes, foot speed, glove control, movement of the ball out of the glove and the setting up for and making an accurate throw to first all get handled by your Hind Brain. It's my 100 piece puzzle, only this time your eyes are drawn to the finished picture and not the individual pieces.

Hind Brain Processing is **NON-JUDGMENTAL**. You either do something or not, without any evaluation or criticism. Because your Hind Brain processes this way, unconsciously using images and muscle memory and coordinating things into a whole, Hind Brain processing is **INSTANTANEOUS**. That is, your Hind Brain has the ability to process unbelievably complex information in a split second!

Based upon what we're saying here, which part of your brain do you want on the field and up at the plate making the plays and swinging that bat in a game? That's right, the Hind Brain! Your Hind Brain plays baseball like a Major Leaguer! He is quick, smooth, loose and talented. Your Hind Brain is where all of your baseball skills lie. Your Front Brain, on the other hand is a hopeless, uncoordinated hack!!! He is far too slow

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and inept to keep up with the complexity and speed of this game. If you gave your Front Brain a bat, he wouldn't know whether to hold the barrel and swing the handle or vice versa because when it comes to athletic performance on the field, your Front Brain is a baseball idiot!!!!

So if you go out onto the field for a game or step into the batter's box for an at-bat and you try to think your way through it, try to coach yourself or continually evaluate/ criticize your play, then you are allowing "the idiot" to take over! The time to think is **NEVER DURING A GAME/IMPORTANT TRYOUT! NEVER!** Thinking takes up way too much time and distracts you from focusing on the moment by moment play of the game.

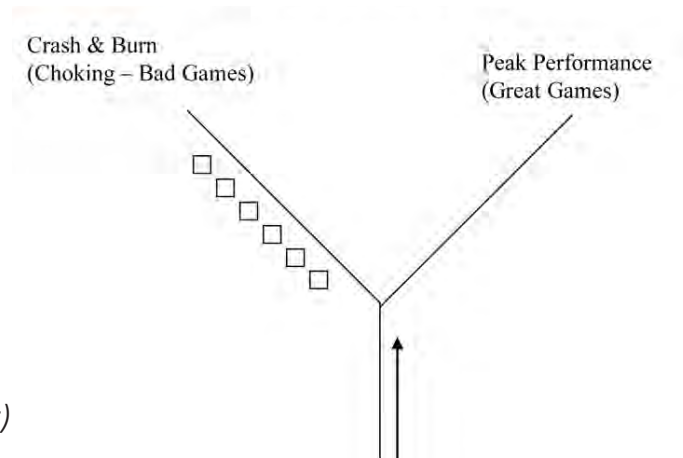
This is not to say that you never want to use your Front Brain. There are times that you want to evaluate your game and play. There are times you want to break down your swing, fielding or throwing into pieces and analyze what works and what doesn't. However, you don't **EVER** want to do this while you are competing. Instead, you should save the analysis for practice and/or the batting cage, long after the game, tryout or tournament is over. In addition, it's fine and even necessary to be in your Front Brain when you are learning new technique, skills or strategies. Remember, your Hind Brain takes over things that you already know. When you first learn new things, you don't know. Therefore you must go through your Front Brain first in the learning process before your Hind Brain can take over.

This is why it is absolutely critical that when you play, you keep your focus on what you're doing in the moment and not on thinking your way through the play or at-bat. This is why you don't want to engage or argue with negative thinking or last minute self-doubts in the field or up at the plate. Instead, notice that they're there and quickly allow your focus to go back to the game and what is going on in the moment. In

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the next chapter we will talk more specifically about exactly how to do this!



(figure 5)

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#10 - KNOW THE “SIGNS” - THE ROAD TO CRASH & BURN

Imagine that you are driving down “X,” a road mapped out in figure #5. You are in a hurry and don’t know the area. Suddenly several hundred yards ahead you see a fork in the road. You desperately look for a place to stop for directions because you have absolutely no clue which fork you should take. Unfortunately, there are no signs of intelligent life anywhere so you pull over to the side of the road, stop the car and get out. You start walking towards the fork and that’s when you see it. At first you’re a little embarrassed that you missed it, because there, right by the left fork is a sign that says, “Dead End.”

You chuckle to yourself as you get back in the car, turn on the ignition, put it in drive and step on the gas. When you get to the intersection you turn the wheel sharply to the left and go down the wrong road. A little further down the road there’s another sign that says, “Road ends, 2 miles.” You smile to yourself and step on the gas. Soon you come to another sign that says, “Warning, road ends 1 mile.” You continue to ac-



celerate the car. Shortly after you approach another sign that reads, “Road ends, ½ mile NO Outlet.” You continue to accelerate. Then you pass a sign that says, “Danger. Road ends 1300 feet, 5000 foot drop.” You think to yourself, “cool, I’ve never been over a 5000 foot cliff before in a car” and you continue to accelerate.

Both you and I know that no one in his right mind would go down this road the way I’ve just described. However, there are two good reasons why someone who was actually sane would do this: **#1 THEY DIDN’T SEE THE SIGNS! #2 THEY SAW THE SIGNS AND CHOSE TO IGNORE THEM.**

What’s this example have to do with you and playing well at crunch time? **PLENTY!** There are numerous personal “signs” as you approach a game/tournament/important showcase which let you know that you’re going down the wrong road. If you miss them or chose to ignore them, then you will consistently end up playing poorly. What are these signs? They represent the typical, unhelpful things that you tend to say to yourself or think before and during the game or tryout. The more you engage and entertain these thoughts, the further down that road you’ll get and the more difficult it will be for you to turn yourself around and go down the right road.

For example, let’s say the very first sign that I’m heading down the wrong road is when I start thinking about the opposing pitcher: “I’ve never been able to hit him before.” This thought may then be followed by, “What if I don’t get any hits....like last game.” My next thought might be, “I’m not feeling very confident right now and the ball doesn’t feel right in my hand when I go to throw it!” followed by “How can we possibly win this game if I can’t hit?” As I let each of these thoughts lead, uninterrupted into the next one, my confidence continues to drop and my level of nervousness rises. Or let’s say that during the game, I make several really bad errors that result in the other team

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scoring. My very first response to that, my first sign might be, “You totally suck! You should’ve made those plays/throws.” If I let those go uninterrupted, it may be followed by, “You always seem to choke under pressure. There’s just no excuse for that!” The next thought/sign might be, “If you don’t start playing better soon, you’re going to lose your starting position!” The further I let myself get “down the road” into these thoughts, the more trouble I’m going to get into performance-wise. As an athlete, you must train yourself to recognize the very first sign that you’re heading down the wrong road so that you can quickly “turn the car around” and head down the right road. Spend some time with the following exercise:

EXERCISE: *Reading your “signs” to ‘crash & burn’ – Chose two or more past game situations where you got too nervous either before or during the game to perform to your potential. Think back to the very first sign (self-talk) that let you know you were heading down the wrong road. You may have been at home, the night before the game, in the car driving to the field or warming up. Now think back to the very next negative thought (second sign) that followed. Where did this thought lead? (third sign). Write down in sequence each of these thoughts leading right up to the game’s start and including your thoughts during the game. Remember, if you can easily recognize the typical signs that indicate you’re going down the wrong road, then you are in a position to be able to turn things around. If you can’t recognize your habitually negative before and during game self-talk, then you will be doomed to “go over the cliff” and play badly, even before the game starts.*

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THE WISE BASEBALL PLAYER SAYETH: “The problem is **NOT** the problem. The real problem is how you **REACT** to the problem.”

It is critically important for you to keep an understanding of

this little saying in the back of your mind. Far too many ball players get knocked off track by things that happen in the game: the plate umpire makes a terrible call, the wind suddenly kicks up, someone watching becomes verbally distracting, the other team gets a lucky break, you make the final out of an inning and end up stranding two runners, the ball takes a last second, funny hop and a sure out turns into a runner on first, you throw a passed ball and allow a run to score, etc. Save your energy and keep your head on straight! In so many things in baseball as well as in life, the problem that has just happened and seems to be causing you so much heartache and aggravation is NOT the real problem. The REAL problem is always how YOU DECIDE TO REACT to this problem. It's always your reaction that gets you into hot water far more than the event itself that occurred.

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DEVELOPING AWARENESS OF YOUR FOCUS OF CONCENTRATION

Concentration is the most central and important mental skill in mental toughness. If you always seem to get too nervous before your games/tryouts/tournaments or consistently hit so much better in BP than you do in a game when it counts, if you have a terrible time letting go of errors, bad calls or strike-outs, if you get easily intimidated or psyched out by certain players and teams, then chances are quite good that your pre- and during game concentration is way off. By learning to control your focus of concentration, you will better handle competitive pressure, avoid psych-outs and intimidation, quickly rebound from mistakes and bad breaks, keep your self-confidence at a high level and more consistently play your best when it counts the most. Understand that one of the main differences between your best and worst games is where you put your focus of concentration.



DISCOVERING THE CONCENTRATION DIFFERENCES BETWEEN YOUR BEST & WORST PERFORMANCES

EXERCISE: Recall in detail a great game. Where and when were you playing? What was the field and weather conditions like? Who were you competing against? Who was pitching for the opposing team? How big was the crowd and who was in it watching you? What, if anything was at stake? Now try to remember your focus of concentration on the day of the game. Where was your focus during warm-up? Where you focusing on yourself and what you were doing or was your concentration locked on the upcoming game and your opponent? What did you focus on during the coach's pre-game comments? In the first inning? During your first at-bat? After an error or making an out? After getting a hit or making a great play? If and when you got tired? Record your answers on Worksheet #3, Concentration & Good Performances. Now answer the very same questions for at least two more great games. After reviewing your concentration for three or more of your better performances you will begin to get a good idea of where YOU need to focus in order for you to do your best.

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Next, pick a particularly bad performance from your past, a time when you felt that you really stunk the place out. In as much detail as possible, recall what you were focusing on the day of that game. Where was your focus during warm up? What did you concentrate on in the first inning? If you struck out, where did your concentration go? Where was your focus in between innings? If you made a throwing or fielding error, where did your focus go? What did you focus on when things got tense in the game? Use Worksheet #4 Concentration & Bad Performances to record your answers. Take two or three more disappointing performances and answer the very same questions for each one. After reviewing your concentration for each of these

bad games you should begin to develop a pretty good idea of what you shouldn't be focusing on both before and during your games.

DO YOU PLAY/HIT BETTER IN PRACTICE THAN YOU DO IN COMPETITION?

If you are like a lot of baseball players I've worked with over the years, then you'd answer with a resounding and frustrating **YES** to this question! "I play great in practice. I'm loose, relaxed and, in the batting cage I crush the ball!. I'm confident and aggressive up at the plate and only swing at good pitches!," you complain..."so how come my game does a disappearing act when it counts, how come I can't even buy a hit in the game. I'm scared, tentative and end up taking really good pitches!?" You can easily come up with the solutions to these puzzling questions by doing a similar concentration exercise.

EXERCISE: *Take a moment to examine your concentration in batting practice (regular practice) as compared to more pressured, game situations using Worksheet #5 Concentration in Practice vs. Games. What do you concentrate on in practice? When you're up at the plate, where do you put your focus of concentration? When you make an error in practice, what happens to your focus? How is that concentration different from your game focus when you make an error? There is no mystery why a talented player will hit/field and throw better in practice than he will under big-game pressure. It is directly related to having a different focus of concentration in both of those situations. The first step in developing the concentration of a winner is to become aware of these differences. Examine your worksheets to see if you can begin to discover the concentration differences between practice and performance.*

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WHAT IS CONCENTRATION?

THE ABILITY TO FOCUS ON WHAT'S IMPORTANT & LET GO OF EVERYTHING ELSE

Remember that when you play badly, it's never a question of you not concentrating! You are ALWAYS concentrating both before and during your games. The more important question is, "WHAT ARE YOU CONCENTRATING ON?"

If you focus on the wrong things either before or during your games, then you will always play tightly and tentatively and way below your capabilities. At game time there are many, many things that can distract you from having a proper focus: Your opponent; How you feel that day; The size of the crowd and who's in it; What's going on in school and your personal life; The field conditions; The weather; Your teammates and how they might be playing; Your coach's yelling and comments both before and during the game; How big this game is; Whether you're starting or not; How good the opposing pitcher is, and the list goes on and on! It is your job to KNOW exactly what is important for you to focus on and what you should be letting go of. Here's an exercise to really help you develop a working understanding of this all important principle: FOCUS ON WHAT'S IMPORTANT AND LET GO OF EVERYTHING ELSE.

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CATCHING MARKERS

EXERCISE: Take 10 different colored magic markers and try the following "concentration test." Your task is to throw all 10 markers up at the same time, relatively high above your head and to then try to catch as many as possible. It's important to use only your hands when you catch them and not to trap them against your body. Now, throw all 10 up at the same time. If you do this correctly without cheating, then like most people I do this with, you probably only caught 0, 1 or 2 markers. If this



is the case, does it really mean that you can't concentrate? ABSOLUTELY NOT! This is an impossible task because there are too many things to focus on all at once. The fact of the matter is:

YOU CAN ONLY CONCENTRATE ON ONE THING WELL AT A TIME

While you can certainly focus on a ton of things at once, when it comes down to peak performance, you can only concentrate on one thing well at a time. If this is true, then you better make darn sure that the one thing you are concentrating really well on is **WHAT'S IMPORTANT!**

Now, pick one special marker in your group of 10 to focus on. For example, let's say the red one. Take that marker, stick it in the middle of the other 9 and throw all 10 up once again at the same time. Remember, your job is to only catch that one red marker. What happens? If you have relatively decent hand-eye coordination, then you effortlessly catch the red one. The point? It's very easy to focus on what's important when you know exactly what that is ahead of time.

WHAT'S IMPORTANT FOR YOU TO FOCUS ON BEFORE AND DURING YOUR GAMES: USING FOCAL POINTS

As we've already discussed, where you put your concentration before and during your games determines whether you'll gobble with the turkeys or soar with the eagles. Where you put your focus of concentration is called a **FOCAL POINT**. Focal points can be **KINESTHETIC** or something that you **FEEL**. They can be **VISUAL** or something that you **LOOK** at. They can be **AUDITORY** or something that you **LISTEN** to. Focal points help you **CONTROL YOUR EYES AND EARS**. That is, they provide you with a predetermined place for you to put your concentration that will help distract you from anything negative or distracting. Controlling your eyes

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means that you only focus on those things, before and during the game that keep you calm, confident and ready to play your best.

In baseball, your main focal point during the action is pretty obvious, it's the ball and then whatever you need to do with it, i.e. get a hit, field it and then make a throw for an out! It's in between plays, outs and pitches, when you have a ton of time to think, that you really want to work on controlling your eyes and ears by using focal points.



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For example, if thinking about and/or focusing on the size, reputation and skill levels of the opposing pitcher during warm-up gets you too nervous, you'd control your eyes by keeping them away from him and on what YOU and your teammates are doing to warm up. Specifically you'd look at the ball as you take batting practice, look down at the grass as you stretch, focus on your teammate as you throw him the ball, etc. (all visual focal points). Controlling your ears similarly means that before and during the game, you only want to listen to those things that keep you calm, confident and loose. For example, if someone is trying to tell you how unbelievably great the opposing hitters are

and this is getting you nervous, then you'd control your ears by either turning up the volume on your ipod or finding someone else to chat with about something that has absolutely nothing to do with the upcoming game!

Examples of **KINSETHETIC** focal points are: The feeling of your stretch as you loosen up before the game; the feeling of your breath going in and out while you're stretching; The feeling of the ball and glove in your hand; the feel of the bat as you take some practice swings; the feel of the sun on your face, etc. Keep in mind that for baseball players, your most important during game focal point is always visual, the ball and then the target of where you want to go with it. Visual, KINESTHETIC and audio focal points are equally as useful in between pitches and innings.

EXERCISE: *List 4 Kinesthetic (K) or feeling focal points that you can use pre-game*

K- FOCAL POINTS: PRE-GAME

- 1)
- 2)
- 3)
- 4)

Examples of **VISUAL (V)** focal points: Looking at your glove or focusing on a spot on your bat in the on-deck circle; looking down at the batter's box as you set your feet; looking at the batter as your pitcher begins his wind-up; looking at a teammate while you talk to him prior to your game; defocusing your eyes and "spacing out" as you look over the field before the game starts; looking at a tree or light pole around the outside of the field; looking at a spot you've made in the dirt or the edge of the grass (infield players); staring at the rubber (pitcher); etc.

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EXERCISE: List 4 Visual focal points that you can concentrate on before your games/at-bats. List 4 Visual focal points you could use during your game.

V – FOCAL POINTS: PRE-GAME

- 1)
- 2)
- 3)
- 4)

V- FOCAL POINTS: DURING GAME

(In between pitches, in between outs & innings)

- 1)
- 2)
- 3)
- 4)

Examples of **AUDITORY (A)** focal points are: Listening to music; Getting involved in a conversation with your coach or teammates; Listening to the sound of your breathing; repeating a positive word or phrase to yourself over and over again; Listening to the sound of the crowd; Singing to yourself.

EXERCISE: List 4 Auditory focal points that you can use pre-game. List 4 Auditory focal points that you can use during your game.

A – FOCAL POINTS: PRE-GAME

- 1)
- 2)
- 3)
- 4)



A – FOCAL POINTS: DURING GAME

(in between pitches, outs and innings)

- 1)
- 2)
- 3)
- 4)

IMPORTANT NOTE: It is NOT necessary for you to have more than one or two focal points either before or during your games. It is also NOT necessary for you to have all three kinds of focal points. What is important here is that you develop familiar concentration targets where you can consistently put your focus both before your games and then during them, (in the field, as you wait for a play to get started and up at the plate, for your at-bats).

DURING GAME FOCUSING: USING RITUALS

As we're discussing, it is critical that you maintain control of your eyes and ears throughout the course of your game. When you allow your concentration to drift to the wrong things, you risk losing your confidence and tightening up. As a ball player, you are always more vulnerable to losing your focus during the time in between pitches when there is a break in the action. It's relatively easy for most athletes to focus during a play because you know your focus needs to stay on the ball and the action in that moment. However, after one play is over and before the next pitch has been thrown, there is plenty of time and room to get distracted by either things going on around you or, more frequently, by what's happening inside your head.

It's during the times when you have "free" time to think, that you really need to maintain control of your concentration. The main way that you can insure that your focus stays in the right place before your at-bat or a play in the field is

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by developing set pre-performance rituals. A pre-performance ritual is comprised of the those little things that you may think about, look at and/or do right before each pitch is thrown or, if necessary, after the play is over.

Your pre-performance ritual is important for two reasons: First, it's **FAMILIAR**. It's something you always do. Therefore it's calming and comforting because no matter who you're facing on the mound, what field you're playing on, how many people you're playing in front of or who may be in the stands specifically watching you, the one thing that always stays the same is your ritual. In this way your ritual is like a **SAFE PORT IN A STORM**. You can be getting ready to bat with the bases loaded and your team down by two runs in the bottom of last inning and you having a chance to send your team to the Championship game, but the one thing that you can rely on to calm you down in this situation is your familiar, pre-bat ritual. When something is familiar in that way it "binds" your anxiety.

The second critical reason for using rituals is that **THEY GIVE YOU SOMETHING SPECIFIC TO FOCUS ON THAT HELPS DISTRACT YOU FROM ALL OF THE DISTRACTIONS!** Rituals provide you with a safe place to put your focus. Because you can't simply say to yourself, "Don't think about that!" or "Don't focus on that!" (because when you do, you end up doing exactly what you don't want to!), your ritual gives you something else to think about/focus on which distracts you from those upsetting thoughts or visuals.

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In every sport, you will always find the very best athletes using pre-performance rituals to center and calm themselves down before taking a crucial free throw, pitching a baseball, swinging a golf club, taking a PK in soccer, serving in tennis, and hitting a softball.

Your ritual doesn't have to be complicated. It can be very simple like a pre-bat ritual where you step into the box, look down at the dirt as you dig yourself into a comfortable stance, adjust your batting glove, take one or two practice swings and then signal the ump that you're ready. Or, if you're an infielder, after throwing the ball around, you can look at your glove, get yourself set physically in a certain way, bounce once or twice on the balls of your feet and then shift your focus to your pitcher and then the ball and the hitter as the pitcher goes through his delivery.

A pre-performance ritual helps you systematically narrow your focus so that by the time the next pitch is thrown, you have a one-point, ball only focus. So be sure to take some time in practice to develop these little, familiar personal behaviors. They'll go a long way in helping you maintain your composure under pressure!



DEVELOPING CHAMPIONSHIP CONCENTRATION

Do you know how to concentrate? This very simple skill is the heart of mental toughness and the secret to you consistently hitting and fielding the way that you're physically capable of. Want to learn to quickly bounce back from errors,

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bad at-bats or tough breaks? Want to be at your best when the heat of competition is turned way up high? Then you have to learn to concentrate like a champion. To effectively build your concentration muscles, you must begin to practice two mini-skills. First, you must recognize that your focus of concentration has veered away from what is important. Second, you must discipline yourself to quickly and gently bring your focus back to the proper target. Mastering this “recognize and return” skill will help turn you into a mentally tough player.

What is critical for you to understand as an athlete is that breaks in your concentration will **NOT** hurt you. Everyone loses their focus now and again. Sometimes, in fact, you may be having the kind of day where you lose your focus a ton! Even during those scattered times, when your concentration is all over the place, you can still play like a champion. The key here is that you recognize that you’ve lost your focus and immediately bring it back. Remember, it’s not the break in concentration that hurts you. It’s the break in concentration that you don’t catch, so you end up playing for several minutes or more without bringing your focus back to what’s important.

NUMBERS WITH DISTRACTIONS

EXERCISE: *Sit quietly with your eyes closed, feet flat on the floor. Put your focus of concentration on your breathing. When you inhale, focus on the feeling in your lower belly of the air coming in. When you exhale and feel the air going out, focus on the number 1. You can “see” a number one in your mind’s eye. You can repeat “one” in your head, or you can do a combination. Inhale, feel the breath. Exhale focus on the number. Since this is a boring exercise you’ll find your mind beginning to wander. When you do drift: Quickly recognize that you’ve lost the proper focus. Return your concentration to your breathing and the feeling of the air coming in. As you exhale focus on the number 2. You can see the #2 in your mind’s eye, repeat the sound “two” in your*

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head, or do a combination. Inhale focus on the breath, exhale focus on the number. Each time you lose your focus and drift, add a number. Do this exercise for 3 minutes without any distractions and then turn a radio or CD player on and try the same exercise for an additional minute or two.

DEVELOPING A CONCENTRATION CUE

EXERCISE: Take a baseball and sit 3-4 feet away from it. Pick a specific spot on the ball to gently rest your eyes. Your eyes will stay on this spot the entire exercise. Shift your focus to your breathing and when you inhale, feel your lower belly rise. As you exhale and feel your diaphragm deflate, repeat a word to yourself. The word will become your “concentration cue” or concentration signal/reminder. You can use words like “ball,” “focus,” “power,” “strong,” “now,” “smile,” etc. Whenever your focus drifts from your visual target, breathing or word, quickly and gently return your focus. Do this exercise for 3 minutes without any distractions. Then take the ball and put it on top of a TV set. Sit far enough back so that in order for you to still see your spot, you must also see the entire screen. Turn the TV on but on very low volume at first. Try to stay focused on your spot for the next minute and a half without getting distracted by the images on the TV screen. When you do get distracted, no problem! Just quickly return your focus back to your spot and internal concentration cue.

Note: Sufficient practice of this exercise will develop and fine-tune your concentration abilities. Soon you will be able to quickly refocus yourself just by quietly repeating your concentration cue to yourself either pre-game, pre-play or in between an at-bat. Understand that this very simple exercise is absolutely critical in helping you strengthen your concentration muscles. If you’re the kind of player who tends to hang onto

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mistakes, errors and bad at-bats, who easily gets psyched out or intimidated or who has trouble staying calm under pressure, then I strongly recommend that you work with this exercise regularly.

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STEP #6

PLAY YOUR OWN GAME/FOCUS ON YOU FOR CHAMPIONSHIP BASEBALL

One of the more common concentration mistakes made by ball players at every level is to get too caught up with the opponent. When you focus too much on your opponent before or during your games, you undermine your confidence, make yourself nervous and stop focusing on the things that help you play/hit your best when it counts the most. As a result, you'll always find your reaction time slower, your bat speed off and your play tentative. For example, thinking about how big, strong and fast the opposing pitcher is may be the best way that I know of to **TOTALLY FREAK YOURSELF OUT!!!** In fact, allowing your focus of concentration to drift too much to your opponent either before or during the game is the best strategy there is to intimidate or psych yourself out. Instead, you have to train yourself to **STAY INSIDE YOURSELF AND PLAY YOUR OWN GAME!**

What does this actually mean?

It means simply to focus on **YOU**, to not get caught up in comparing yourself with the competition, to not get distracted by even comparing yourself with your



teammates. It also means that you **DON'T** want to spend time, pre-game going on-line and “studying” the stats and wins/losses of your opponents. Athletes who spend the days leading up to a big game or tournament doing this are unknowingly inflating the skill and prowess of their opponents while simultaneously undermining their own confidence.

There's a cardinal rule in baseball as in most other sports. **YOU WANT TO PLAY YOUR OWN GAME OR STAY INSIDE YOURSELF!** If the strength in your game is to be patient up at the plate, stay relaxed and consistently hit singles, then this is what you want to do. You don't want to suddenly come up to the plate and start pressing yourself to hit a home run. This is a great way to step outside of yourself, try too hard and come up empty! This is one of the problems with over-focusing on the reputation and strength of your opponents. It will trick you into believing that you have to do something extraordinary to stay on the same field as you. This will get you muscling the ball and overhitting, and when that happens, you're toast!!! This is one of the other reasons that you don't want to engage in thinking about, focusing on or comparing yourself to the competition.

COMPARISON is a dirty word in sports. When you get caught up in comparing yourself you will almost always come out on the short end of the stick. Why? Because comparison is something that we do in our head, using our imagination. Most of the time your imagination will give you a negatively distorted picture of your skills and ability in relation to others. If you really want to outplay a particular team, what this means is that you have to focus even more on your-

self and your game, **NOT** on them! This is an important contradiction that most players and coaches don't fully understand.

To outplay the competition you must focus more on **YOU, NOT ON THEM!** If you get too caught up with how good you think that they are or what you think they can do, then you'll tend to get yourself too uptight to play your best. As a

STEP #6



result you'll go out there and either try too hard, pressing too much, or you'll be so intimidated by your opponent that you'll play scared and tentatively.

The wise .475 hitter sayeth:

REMEMBER, THE MORE YOU CONCENTRATE ON BEATING AN OPPONENT, THE LESS CHANCE THAT YOU WILL! THE LESS YOU FOCUS ON BEATING AN OPPONENT AND THE MORE YOU FOCUS ON YOU AND PLAYING YOUR OWN GAME, THE MORE CHANCE THERE IS THAT YOU WILL BEAT THEM!

Understand this:

EVERY PITCH/PLAY DURING A GAME WHERE YOU ARE FOCUSING ON THE OPPONENT AND HOW GOOD YOU THINK HE IS, IS A MOMENT WHERE YOU'RE HANDICAPPING YOURSELF, A MOMENT WHEN YOU WILL PLAY BELOW YOUR ABILITY!

If you spend time worrying about an opponent, then you are robbing yourself of your speed, confidence, strengths and skills! How good your opponent is on paper, his reputation, the kind of buildup your coach or the media may have given him are all totally irrelevant to whether you'll hit, field and throw the way that you're capable of. You want your energy and focus on **YOU**, on your game and not on **THEM**! Yes, it's occasionally useful to have some scouting info on an opponent and his strengths and weaknesses. However, getting too caught up in that information will most often psych you out. Stay inside yourself. Focus on **YOU! PLAY YOUR OWN GAME!!!!**

EXERCISE: *Practice focusing on YOU in practice. During drills and practices be alert to whenever your focus of concentration drifts to a teammate, the coach or someone watching. Immediately catch yourself and return your focus to what YOU are doing at the moment. If you find that you are focusing on another player and comparing*

STEP #6



yourself, quickly interrupt this focus and bring yourself back to YOU. Try to get in the habit of immediately catching yourself the instant you drift away from YOU and then quickly coming back. The more that you work on this in practice, the easier it will be for you to stay inside yourself in pressured game situations.

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STEP#7

STAY IN THE “NOW” FOR PEAK PERFORMANCE

Another common and costly concentration mistake made by many athletes at the big game/tournament or during a crucial at-bat/play is what I call “**MENTAL TIME TRAVELING.**” What “time traveling” involves is mentally leaving the present, or the **NOW** and either going back into the **PAST** or jumping ahead into the **FUTURE**. For example, if you had booted a ball in the first inning and you’re still thinking about when you take the field for the second, then you are mentally in the past. If you take a “perfect” pitch for a called third strike that ends your team’s rally and you can’t seem to stop thinking about it when you take up your position in the field, then you are again in the past. Similarly, if you go into a game thinking about the last time that your team lost to this pitcher and team, then you’re mentally in the past. As far as baseball players go, hanging out in the **PAST** is a universal mental mistake and one that will distract you from the task at hand and kill your confidence. To play your best you have to learn to immediately let your errors and bad at-bats go. Carrying your screw-ups around with you during a game will **NOT** help you correct them. On the contrary! Hanging onto your strikeouts and errors will generate a ton more



of them! Keep in mind that the time for you to work on your mistakes is **IN PRACTICE** after the game and **NEVER** during the game!



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What can you do to quickly let your errors and bad at-bats go?

First of all you have to get good at recognizing that your focus of concentration has gotten stuck in the **PAST**. One way to do this is to know what the “language” is of the past. There are certain words and phrases that your “inner coach” uses that are clues to your being in the past. For example, baseball players who tend to mentally hang out in the past, use language like: “Here we go again;” “I knew this was going to happen;”



“I always choke under pressure;” or “Whenever I have a bad first at-bat, the rest of my at-bats suck!;” “I can’t ever seem to hit him!;” “How could I have dropped that ball!;” or “I should’ve done this” or “I shouldn’t have done that!” All of these phrases let you know that your focus is in the past.

Understand that having a past focus isn’t always bad. There are times that you can temporarily go back into the past and it can be both positive and constructive. For example, let’s say that you’re team is down 4 runs going into the last inning. You can think of other games in the past where you were similarly down and were able to stage a comeback and win. This kind of time traveling isn’t destructive as long as when you step back out onto the field, your focus is back in the **NOW** of the game.

LETTING GO OF MISTAKES:

Mistake rituals: As a baseball player, it is absolutely critical that you keep your focus of concentration in the **NOW** of the game. Dwelling on the past and errors, bad at-bats or terrible calls will always distract you from the important task at hand and make you too uptight to play to your potential. It’s imperative that you learn to not clutter your present focus with things from the past. To help you quickly let go of these and bring your focus back into the **NOW** of the game, you want to develop a “mistake ritual.” What’s a mistake ritual? It’s a series of small steps that you go through mentally and physically right after an error or a bad at-bat which will help you return your focus back to the **NOW** of the game.

Typically after a mistake, an athlete will do three things that keep the mistake in the forefront of his mind. First, he will tend to allow his focus to remain on the error or bad at-bat. Second, he will engage in negative self-talk, angrily putting himself down for screwing up. Third, and as a result of the first two, the athlete’s anxiety level and muscle tension will

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rise. If you don't immediately interrupt this process, if you allow yourself to stay distracted, upset and physically tight, then the one thing that you can surely count on is that more errors and bad at-bats will soon follow. You can effectively counteract these negative effects from a poor performance by developing and practicing a "mistake ritual." Here's an example:

Let's say that as the short stop, you just booted the ball allowing a sure double play ball to get away from you. Instead of your team being out of the inning, you tell yourself that you're now responsible for the runners on first and second! You think about how badly you played that ball and you're upset with yourself that you allowed your focus to get ahead of yourself, looking up too soon instead of keeping your head and eyes down on the ball. Your inner coach is going to town with, "God, you totally choked! How could you have missed that?!!! You suck!!!"

Now, before you let yourself get totally out of control, you use the following mistake ritual in between pitches: You turn your back to the infield (symbolically turning your back on the mistake), walk to the edge of the grass, bend down and pick up a few blades of grass. (The grass is a symbolic representation of the fielding error). You then focus your concentration on the grass, instead of how you let the ball go through your legs. You keep your eyes on the grass and as you do that, you begin to change your negative self-talk. "Let it go. You'll get it back. Leave it in the past. Stay calm and loose. Stay in the **NOW!**" At the same time that you are countering the negativity, you deliberately begin to slow and deepen your breathing, making sure that your focus goes completely to the physical sensations of a relaxed inhale and exhale. You do this to physically calm yourself down. When an athlete is uptight and emotions are running in the red zone, getting back in control of your breathing is one of the fastest and best ways to get your head back in the game.

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Now this ritual sounds like it may take several minutes to pull off. In actuality, it's only just a few seconds and it can easily fit into the time that you have available before your pitcher begins his pre-pitch routine. When you feel sufficiently calmer, you then take the grass that you've been holding in your fist, (your error) and you then "let it go," (symbolically and physically) "throwing it away!" You then return to your position at short and get yourself set for the next pitch, your focus in the **NOW**.

As a baseball player, you can take any piece from this ritual that you'd like. You can add new ones of your own. The point is that you want to develop your own personal ritual that you can use to help you mentally let go of the past and stay in the **NOW**. Take some time during the week and actually practice this ritual in practice. That way when you're under the stress of a big game, you will still be able to regain your focus and composure without having to think about it.

Mistake rituals for at-bats: You can do something similar for those times during an at-bat when you make a mistake. For example, let's say that you just take your perfect pitch for a called second strike. You are angry at yourself for letting that one get away from you. You call time, step out of the box and refocus your concentration on your breathing. As you look down at the dirt, you inhale slowly, feeling the air come in, and then, as you exhale, you hear yourself think, "let go," and "just this pitch!" As you step back in, you focus your eyes on a spot in the batter's box and then "erase" the spot by rubbing your foot across it. (You are symbolically erasing the last pitch). Then you signal to the ump that you're ready and refocus your attention on the pitcher, his release point and the ball.

Mistake rituals for pitchers: More than any other position on the field, pitchers need to maintain an "in the **NOW**" focus. If you throw a bad pitch and give up a run or two, if you walk one or more batters in a row, if you hit a batter, then

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you need to have the mental ability to quickly let that mistake go, forgive yourself and get your concentration back to this next batter and this next pitch. Every pitch that you throw where your focus is in the past, is another mistake waiting to happen!! Because your role and performance is central to the success of your team, how you handle your mistakes will usually set the mental and emotional tone for the entire team.

Most pitchers already have a pre-pitch ritual that they have worked out over the years. It's those little idiosyncratic, sometimes superstitious things that you do before and after each pitch. You can build one or more specific things into your after-pitch ritual that will serve as your mistake or bad pitch ritual. For example, let's say that you get ahead of a batter and then end up hitting him to load the bases. Instead of being out of the inning you're now in hot water! You're frustrated and angry with yourself. You walk to the back of the mound and look towards the outfield. As you do, you deliberately slow your breathing down and change your self talk to, "let it go...just this pitch, one pitch at a time...stay calm, stay in the now." Then you walk up to the mound, look down, pick a spot in the dirt and then rub your foot across the spot, "erasing it" (symbolically rubbing out the hit batter, the past, and reminding yourself that the only thing that is **IMPORTANT RIGHT NOW** is **THIS** next pitch). Then you proceed through the rest of your typical pre-pitch ritual.

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MISTAKE WASTEBASKETS: Another quick technique that you can use to help you let go of your mistakes during the game is to pick one or more "mistake wastebaskets" somewhere around the field.

What's a "mistake wastebasket"? Interesting enough, it's where you can put all your mistakes and errors during the game so that they don't distract you and negatively affect your play. What you do is pick a spot or one or more objects around the field before the game starts that will serve as your wastebaskets. They should be something that is relatively easy to



see from the field. You can choose a tree, a nearby building, an actual trash can at one side of the diamond, a part of the bleachers, a spot on the scoreboard, etc. Once you've got your spot picked out, you want to make a "deal" with yourself. The deal is that every time that you mess up, you will "deposit" that mistake in the "wastebasket" until after the game. How do you "deposit" the mistake during the game? You can simply take a quick look at the spot and, in that look, you are symbolically leaving your mistake or error there. Or, if your "basket" is within reach near the dugout, you can literally go over to it in between innings and "throw" the mistake in it.

MISTAKE FOLDERS: A variation of this technique and one used to help emphasize that point that mistakes are to be thought about and worked on after the game in practice and not during it is to imagine that on your bench or in the dugout you have your very own "mistake folder." Every time that you make an error or have a disappointing at-bat, you can quickly glance over at your "folder" and that glancing will symbolically deposit your error/bad at-bat in the folder to be worked on after the game in the next practice.

The fist squeeze technique: As we've been discussing, your primary mental task after you make an error or experience something upsetting is to immediately let these things go. Letting go actually has a physical feeling. Let me demonstrate it to you. Close your eyes right now and gradually tighten your right fist and arm from your fingers all the way to your shoulder. As you gradually tighten your hand and arm from 25% of your strength all the way up to 90% of your strength study the feelings of tension up and down your arm. Hold the tension about 10 seconds and then say the words to yourself, "let go," and as you do, very slowly begin to let the tension drain out of your right fist and arm. Notice the difference in feeling up and down your arm as the tension slowly drains out. Now repeat this process a second time remembering to keep your eyes closed. Pay particularly close attention to the feelings of letting go as your arm relaxes. Repeat this exercise

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several times until you can memorize the physical feeling of “letting go.” Practice this exercise a few minutes a day so that you can link the words, “let go” with the actual physical feeling of letting go. In game situations, after making an error, a mistake or striking out, you can imagine that you’ve just “put” the error, mistake or strike-out in your hand, make a fist, hold it there and then, repeat those words to yourself, “let go.”

You can use this same technique after a particularly bad practice, tryout or game. Imagine that you can symbolically place that bad outing in your right fist. Tighten it to 90% of your tension, hold it for 10 seconds and then repeat, “let go” to yourself. As you do, and you begin to feel the feelings of letting go, imagine that you can also let go of that bad performance and all the feelings associated to it.

The breathing technique: During an at-bat, in between pitches and in between innings, completely shift your focus of concentration out of your head and away from your thoughts to the feeling of your breathing. Just follow your breath in and then out. As you exhale, and let go of the breath, imagine that you can also begin to let go of, a little at a time, any disappointment, frustration or anger about what just happened, the last at bat, a bad call from the ump or an error. With each progressive exhalation imagine that you can get rid of the tension, self-doubts and negative feelings until they become completely replaced by composure, relaxation and confidence.

If baseball players aren’t getting themselves trapped in the past, the other very common mental mistake they make is to “time travel” into the **FUTURE**. When you leave the **NOW** and go into the **FUTURE**, you make yourself extremely vulnerable to performance-disrupting nervousness and **CHOKING!** What does it mean to go into the future? You’re thinking about the game’s outcome as you’re warming up. You’re telling yourself that you should be able to beat this opponent. You

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worry about whether you'll play well or if you'll fail to hit. You worry about your batting average. You think about what people might say if indeed you do go o'fer. You get into the "what-if's?" "What if I choke?" "What if I get re-injured?" "What if I can't hit him?" "What if I get benched?"

Now don't get me wrong. There are times when it is perfectly fine to go into the future. When you do mental rehearsal and you "mentally practice" hitting and fielding to your potential, staying calm and running the bases aggressively, you are in the future. This will not get you into trouble as long as your mental sessions are far enough ahead of your game so that they don't get you too nervous. Thinking about your outcome goals in practice, (i.e. your batting average, playing well enough to make varsity or get a scholarship, etc.), why you're working so hard and what you want to accomplish is going into the future. However, it's perfectly fine to spend some time in practice reminding yourself of why you're working hard. The key point here is that you do **NOT EVER** want to take your goals with you onto the field for a game, an important tryout or a critical showcase. Keep in mind that focusing in the future on your goals will motivate you in practice to work hard but having that same future focus going into a game will only serve to get you too uptight to play your best.

REMEMBER: EVERY MOMENT THAT YOU SPEND PRE-GAME/ PITCH/AT-BAT OR DURING THE GAME WHEN YOUR FOCUS IS IN THE FUTURE IS A MOMENT WHERE YOU ARE SETTING YOURSELF UP TO GET TOO NERVOUS TO PLAY TO YOUR POTENTIAL. The secret to you playing consistently with intensity and a high level of skill is very simple. You must mentally keep yourself in the **NOW!**

THE MOST IMPORTANT PITCH IN ANY GAME IS THE ONE THAT IS BEING THROWN RIGHT NOW!!!!!!

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It is critical that you learn to immediately recognize when you are mentally time traveling so that you can very quickly return your focus to the task at hand. If you quickly return your focus to the NOW every time that you drift, then the drifting will not hurt your confidence nor hinder your play. What WILL sabotage your game is when you drift to either the past or future and then you allow yourself to stay there for an extended amount of time.

DEVELOPING AWARENESS OF YOUR MENTAL TIME TRAVELING

EXERCISE: *Spend time in practice working on staying mentally in the NOW. Pick a five minute period every so often during practice where your goal is to mentally keep your focus on what you are doing in the NOW. Every time that you become aware that your focus has drifted backwards to the past and an error or forward to the future and what you might be doing later or the results you want, quickly return it to the now and what you are doing at that moment. This is an excellent way to build up this very important mental muscle that you need to play championship baseball.*

LEAVING YOUR BAD GAMES IN THE PAST – FORGIVENESS

Want to play like a champion? Want to go as far as possible in this sport? If you do, then you have to learn to be kinder to yourself after you mess up. It's one thing to have high standards and expect yourself to perform to these. It's quite another to put yourself down and emotionally beat yourself up whenever you fail or fall short. It's fine to strive for perfection, but getting upset with yourself when you're not perfect is a recipe for personal and athletic disaster! Getting down on yourself will **NEVER** make you a better player. **NEVER!** What it will do is further kill your confidence and tighten you up like a drum!

Instead you want to learn to forgive yourself for your failures, losses and mistakes. Use your setbacks and disappoint-

STEP #7



ments to figure out what you need to change. Use your failures as feedback to improve. However, do not waste your emotional energy using your failures and losses as evidence that you aren't good enough and as an emotional stick to beat yourself up with! This is a huge mistake that will never motivate you to greatness. Instead it will progressively knock you down and crush your spirit. Learn to be a good coach to yourself. Forgive yourself for your humanness. Forgive yourself for your mistakes. Learn what you need to change in order to correct them and then, **FORGET THEM!!!**

UNDERSTAND THIS: You don't go from beginner to pro in anything in sports or life without failing and messing up enough!



ARE YOU TRYING TO PLAY GOOD BALL WITH WEIGHTS ON?

One big mental mistake made by athletes at every level is to go into a game, tryout or tournament carrying expectations. As we've discussed, expectations are related to the game, tryout or tournament's outcome or your goals. If you want to win the starting position on varsity, pitch a shut out, win the State tournament, beat a certain opponent or impress the college scouts so you can earn a college scholarship, then whether

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you know it or not, if you're thinking about these goals when you go into your performances, you're carrying "heavy" weights into those games. It's fine for you to have goals and expectations in practice. In fact, your expectations and goals can actually motivate you to work harder and longer in practice. However, a cardinal rule for playing **WINNING BASEBALL** is....

NEVER TAKE YOUR GOALS WITH YOU ONTO THE FIELD WHEN IT COUNTS.

Bringing expectations onto the field with you at crunch time will only weigh you down just as sure as if you were wearing 10'lb weights strapped to each ankle and 5'lb'ers strapped to both wrists. You will feel too burdened to play to your potential. When you make a game, tryout or tournament too important, when you pressure yourself with "I have to," "I've got to," "I need to," or "What if I don't?," then the end result is that you'll play tight and tentatively. Leave your goals and expectations at home where they belong. Your goals and expectations should only be used as a motivational tool for practice, NEVER as a pressure-inducing threat when the outcome is important to you.

STEP #7

Technique: Write your goals down on a piece of paper the week or night before a big game, tryout or showcase tournament and then put those goals in a drawer, out of sight. Do not look at your goals until after the performance is completely over. This is exactly what you need to do mentally. You need to keep your goals and expectations out of sight when it comes to your big games.



STEP #8

STAYING COOL & CALM IN THE CLUTCH

(Learning how to handle the pressure of big games)

#1 UNDERSTANDING THE CAUSES OF CHOKING AND PRE-GAME NERVOUSNESS

Here's the good news about those pre-game/pre-at-bat jitters: The importance of the game, tryout or tournament doesn't make you nervous. How talented or strong the opposing pitchers/hitters are don't make you nervous. How big the crowd is doesn't make you nervous. Who's in the crowd watching you doesn't make you nervous. Who you have to play in the next round doesn't make you nervous. Your opponent's record doesn't make you nervous.

YOU MAKE YOURSELF NERVOUS

It is **NOT** outside events that cause you to get so nervous that you can't seem to breathe and feel like you're going to leave your lunch in the batter's box. Instead, it's what you say to yourself and focus on both before and during your games that's



the real culprit here. Nervousness comes from inside, not outside of us. This is the good news because you can learn to control what you think about and focus on before and during your games. It's the good news because with a little bit of practice, you can learn how to calm yourself down under big game pressure.

THE UC'S AS THE MAIN CAUSE OF RUNAWAY NERVES

(FIGURE #6)

When you go into a game or tryout and either before or during that performance you are focusing on one or more UC's or "uncontrollables," then three things will always happen to you. First, you will begin to get nervous and physically tense. Second, you will lose your confidence. Third, and as a direct result of these first two, your game will quickly "head south," down the proverbial tubes. An uncontrollable is any factor before or during your game that is directly out of your control. Uncontrollables are mental traps. They are lying in wait for you and every other player at that tournament. The bigger the competition, the more likelihood there'll be that you will fall into them. How do you avoid a trap? **YOU HAVE TO SEE IT! YOU HAVE TO KNOW IT'S THERE!** You have to know what the uncontrollables are and especially the ones that have gotten to you in the past.

STEP #8

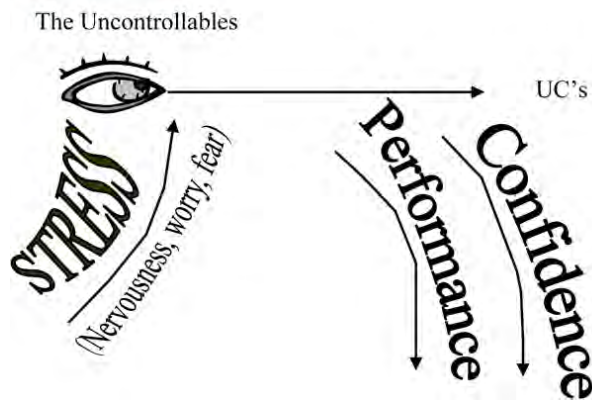
GETTING TO KNOW YOUR "UC'S"

EXERCISE: Below is a list of some typical uncontrollables. Go through the list and put an asterisk next to each UC that has gotten to you in previous pressured situations. When you're finished, take a piece of paper and list all the uc's that you starred.

Next, take this list and post it in a highly visible place in your room. Why would you want to do that? Isn't that sort of negative? If the uncontrollables are traps and the only way to avoid a trap is to be able to "see" it ahead of time, then having such a list will keep you exquisitely aware of what you



should stay away from concentration-wise before and during your games:



THE UC'S

- » How big the game/tournament/tryout is
- » How well your teammates' may be playing
- » Your opponent – His size, strength, talent, reputation, etc.
- » The strength of the opposing pitcher
- » Whether your opponent plays head games/talks trash
- » The umpiring
- » Weather, temperature (hot –cold), wind, sun, etc.
- » The field conditions
- » Luck – either good or bad
- » How long you have in between games (at a tournament)
- » How you feel that day (both physically and emotionally, i.e. sickness, fatigue, injury, etc.)
- » The kind of warm-up you had
- » Other people's expectations of you (How they will think of or see you)
- » What your parents will think or say about how you play, i.e their reaction to the game's outcome
- » Who's watching you in the stands, (scouts, friends, relatives etc.)

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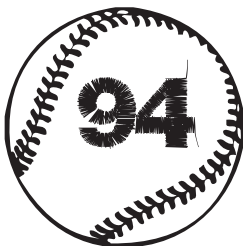
- » Anything related to the **FUTURE**; (i.e winning, losing, getting a hit, etc.)
- » Anything in the **PAST** (mistakes, errors, what happened the last game, etc.)
- » Injuries during the game
- » The unexpected (“injury” timeout, etc.)
- » Academic/personal stuff outside of baseball, i.e. pressure for papers/tests
- » The kind of draw your team got
- » Interpersonal dynamics on your team, (i.e. “drama”)
- » Etc.

IMPORTANT NOTE: *Keep in mind that focusing on an uncontrollable by itself won't get you into trouble. What WILL get you into performance hot water is focusing on an uncontrollable and NOT immediately returning your concentration to those things that you CAN control. It is perfectly natural to get periodically knocked off balance by the uc's. When this does happen, be sure that you:*

STEP #8

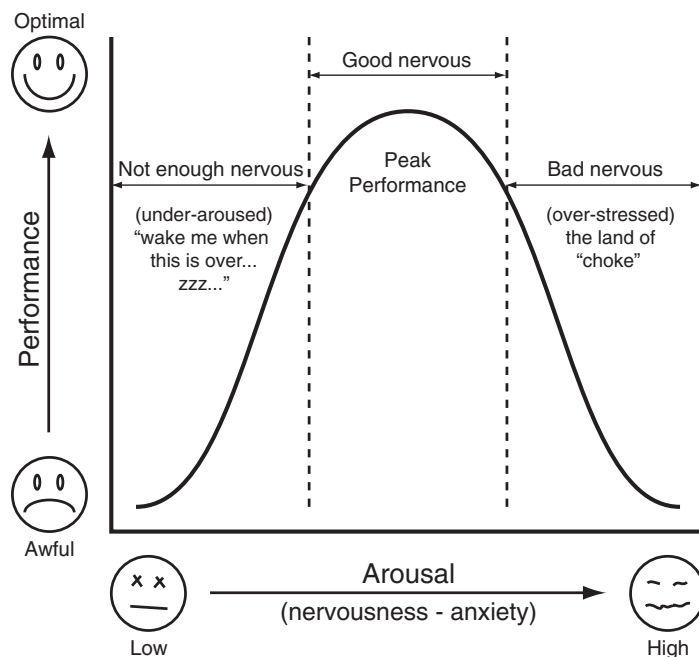
#1 RECOGNIZE THAT WHAT YOU ARE NOW FOCUSING ON IS AN UNCONTROLLABLE; #2 QUICKLY AND GENTLY RETURN YOUR FOCUS BACK TO WHAT YOU CAN CONTROL AND WHAT'S IMPORTANT AT THAT MOMENT. Remember, the one thing that you can ALWAYS learn to control is how YOU CHOOSE to react to the uncontrollables.

TO STAY CALM UNDER PRESSURE, BE SURE THAT YOU SHIFT YOUR FOCUS AWAY FROM THE “UNCONTROLLABLES.”



#2 READING YOUR LEVEL OF PRE-GAME NERVOUSNESS/EXCITEMENT

How excited or nervous you are before your games/tryouts/tournaments will make or break how well you play. Since the secret to playing great baseball under pressure is to stay loose and relaxed, your ability to consistently do this is absolutely critical to making your athletic dreams come true. “Reading” your level of pre-performance excitement/nervousness is an important first step in getting yourself back in control. (Figure #7: Performance arousal scale/curve)



In figure #7 you can see that as you move from left to right on the horizontal nervousness/excitement scale your level of pre-performance physiological arousal (nervousness) increases from being completely relaxed or under-aroused on the far left to being completely freaked out or over-aroused on the far right. The vertical axis measures how well you’re playing. When you’re low on the graph, you’re performing poorly and when you’re higher on the graph you’re “walking on water.”

STEP #8



As the diagram illustrates, there are three basic levels of pre-game nervousness/excitement: “not enough nervous”; “good nervous”; or “bad nervous.” Understand that it is IMPOSSIBLE to play to your potential when you are in “not enough” or “bad nervous.” If you go into a game overconfident or too cocky, the resultant “not enough nervous” will insure that you play flat. If, on the other hand you go into the game dreading it, worried about losing, feeling too much pressure or in other ways over-aroused, the resultant tight muscles will insure that you choke badly.

Playing your best when it counts the most demands that you be in “good nervous” right before the start. “Good nervous” is actually not nervousness at all but a feeling of being excited, anticipating the game and feeling a sense of confidence that you’re up to the challenge while at the same time, still maintaining a relaxed looseness.

There are 3 primary ways that you “read” your level of pre-performance nervousness:

#1 PHYSICALLY in how you **FEEL** in your **BODY**

#2 MENTALLY in how you **THINK** and what you **FOCUS** on.

#3 BEHAVIORALLY in how you **ACT** pre- game.

STEP #8

“Good,” “bad” and “not enough nervous” look and feel different from each other. If you can learn to recognize these differences and your particular signs of “good”, “bad” and, when appropriate “not enough” nervous, then you are one step closer to learning to consistently stay cool and calm in the clutch. The following is a list of some of the general signs of increased nervousness (either “good” or “bad nervous”) in our three main categories:



PHYSICALLY	MENTALLY	BEHAVIORALLY
Increased heart & pulse	Thinking speeds up	Rituals
Faster/shallow breathing	Negative thinking	Mood swings
Tighter muscles	Focus narrows	Getting “hyper”
Cold hands/feet	Increased self-doubts	“Motor mouth”
Dry mouth	Critical of self/others	Quiet
Frequent yawning	Forgetting	No movement
Heaviness in limbs	Negative images	Nervous habits
Energy/lightness	The “what if’s”	Superstitions
Fatigue	Getting “spacey”	“The Giggles”
Nausea	Positive/negative attitude	Hostility
Vomiting	Mental rehearsal	Withdrawal
Frequent urinating	Increased confidence	
“The runs”	Hang onto mistakes	
Increased sweating	Let mistakes go	

LEARNING TO “READ” YOUR OWN PERSONAL SIGNS

EXERCISE: *Think back to several really great past performances. These reflect a state of “good nervous.” Using Worksheet #6 and the above three columns as a guide, try to recall in as much detail as possible exactly how you felt physically, what you thought about/focused on, and how you acted before each of these top performances, (i.e. before making a great play in the field; getting a clutch hit, etc.). Next compare all your responses and you should discover your typical signs of “good nervous.” Now do the same for several sub-par performances using Worksheet #7. (most bad performances are a direct result of too much excitement or “bad nervous” rather than a state of “not enough nervous.”) Again, use the three categories to help you get specific about what your “bad” or “not enough nervous” looked like. Once you’ve reviewed several bad performances in this way, see if you can discover any patterns in how you experienced “bad” or, when applicable, “not*



enough nervous.” These patterns will reflect your typical signs of “bad (or not enough) nervous.”

#3 ACTING AS IF

The “ACT AS IF” strategy is one of the more important mental toughness techniques to help you get yourself back in control when the pressure is turned way up high and the garbage is hitting the fan. **ACT AS IF** is based on the principle:

IF YOU ACT THE WAY THAT YOU WANT TO FEEL, SOON YOU WILL BEGIN TO FEEL THE WAY THAT YOU ACT.

The way that you feel on the inside, your **EMOTIONS**, are always determined by how you act on the outside, your **MOTIONS**. In other words the way that you physically carry yourself, your posture, facial expression, physical gestures, walk, head and shoulders will ultimately affect and determine how you end up feeling emotionally. After an error, mistake or bad at-bat, many baseball players will hang their head, drop their shoulders, put a disgusted or down look upon their face and drag their feet around. However, when you **ACT** discouraged and down, when you act like a loser, you will begin to **FEEL** even more bummed out. Instead you want to **ACT AS IF**. You want to keep your feelings/emotions **INSIDE** and on the **OUTSIDE** you want to act like everything is fine.

Keep in mind that **ACTING AS IF** has absolutely nothing to do with moving your lips or trying to trick or convince yourself that everything is fine. Everything isn't fine and it's **OK** to acknowledge that fact on the **INSIDE**. However, on the **OUTSIDE** you want to act like you're in control by keeping your head and shoulders up, a smile or neutral expression on your face and maintaining a spring in your step and energy in your behaviors.

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ACTING AS IF is what I call a **WINNER'S FALL BACK POSITION**. When a winner is exhausted, he will physically act like he has a ton of energy. When a winner is nervous, he'll physically act calm. When a winner is discouraged or down he will act as if he's up. Acting as if is the **FAKE IT 'TIL YOU MAKE IT STRATEGY** where you are deliberately **TELLING A LIE** with your body! So pre- game/at-bat, when you can feel your lunch coming up and you can't seem to stop your knees from knocking together, **ACT AS IF** you are calm and in control. Deliberately act exactly the way that you would as if you were in "good nervous." If before all of your great games you were jumping around, laughing and joking with your friends, then get off your butt and start doing that!

One of the main reasons that **ACTING AS IF** is such an important strategy is because baseball is a game of momentum shifts. You can be up one minute and down the next depending upon how certain innings play out. Whether these momentum shifts overwhelm you and your teammates or not, whether they give your opponent the added edge to pull off the win, depends entirely on how you respond when things are going badly. If you hang your head after an error that let's in the tying run, if you show your upset and disgust when you start losing, if you angrily slam your bat into the ground after striking out, then you are inadvertently giving your opponent a psychological and emotional boost by acting like a loser.

Anytime you show your negative emotions on the field either by dropping your shoulders, angrily throwing your batting helmet, yelling out in disgust, or snapping at a teammate, etc. you are letting your opponent know that you are upset and therefore vulnerable. You are telling him, "I and my teammates are in trouble and if you apply pressure on us now we'll completely crack!" It's like being in a high stakes poker game but continually showing your cards to your opponent. When you do that, you'll lose your shirt! When your opponent has a big inning

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and things are going against you, you want to show your opponent absolutely nothing. You want to keep a neutral or intense expression on your face and **ACT AS IF** nothing has happened. When your opponent sees that time after time over the course of the game, that you have no negative reaction when things go against you, then it will ultimately have an intimidating effect on him.

So keep your cards to yourself when you play. **ACT LIKE A WINNER** all the time on the field. Keep your head up, your shoulders square and speed in your step whenever things go wrong. Do not let on that you may be feeling down or discouraged inside. On the outside always show your opponent the behavior of a champion.

STAYING CALM IN THE CLUTCH: RELAXATION TECHNIQUES

#4 SLOW AND DEEPEN YOUR BREATHING

When you're nervous, your breathing speeds up and gets faster. This kind of shallow, rapid breathing will tighten your muscles and tire you out prematurely, causing you to slow down on the field and play poorly. To help you quickly calm yourself down under pressure you must learn to control the depth and rate of your breathing. Sit quietly in a room free from distractions and put your concentration on your diaphragm or lower belly. Inhale very, very slowly focusing on your lower belly filling up like a balloon. At the top of your breath, when you can't take in any more air, pause for a slow count of 3 or 4. Then exhale, much slower than normal and feel your lower belly

deflate. Repeat this sequence and imagine that as you inhale, you are completely surrounded by a white cloud. The cloud is filled with fresh oxygen, energy, confidence, calmness, strength, endurance, etc. As you inhale very slowly and feel your diaphragm rise, watch that cloud go in through your nose. At the top of your breath when you can't take in any

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more, pause and as you count slowly to 3 or 4, imagine that you can experience all that good stuff that you inhaled moving throughout your body. As you exhale slowly and feel your belly fall, imagine that you can watch that cloud come out from the tip of your nose, as you get rid of any negative energy, fatigue, self-doubts, stress, etc. Notice that that as you exhale, the cloud now comes out a much darker color like black or brown. Repeat 8 – 10 of these slow, diaphragmatic breaths being sure to concentrate on the feeling of the air coming in and going out and “watching” in your mind’s eye, the cloud coming in and going out.

NOTE: *Like all the exercises and techniques in this workbook, consistent practice of this breathing technique will enable you to confidently rely on it in pressured situations. Two or more of these diaphragmatic breaths right before a crucial at-bat or play in the field will help you calm down and get yourself back into “good nervous.”*

#5 STRETCH

Stretching is an easy and effective way to quickly calm yourself down pre-game. When done the correct way, stretching will loosen your muscles and provide you with a calming focal point where you can rest your concentration. The key to correct pre- game stretching is very simple. Make sure that as you physically stretch, your focus of concentration is completely on what you are doing in that moment and on the feeling of the stretching. It does you absolutely no good to stretch pre-game if, while you stretch, you’re allowing your concentration to wander to your opponent, worries about the game’s outcome or anything else that would distract you and get you uptight. Focus on the stretch while you stretch. In other words, stay in the “here & now.”

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#6 TIGHTEN & RELEASE

Another quick technique to help you physically loosen up right before and even during that big game is an abbreviation of the progressive muscle relaxation exercise. It involves focusing on any part of you that feels tight at the moment and deliberately tightening it even more for a short amount of time before then releasing the tension. For example, let's say that you have tension up and down your legs, deliberately tighten those already tense muscles even more. Hold the muscle tension for 10 seconds and as you do so, be sure that your concentration is on the feeling of the tension in your leg muscles. Then say to yourself, "let go," and as you do, slowly release all the muscle tension in that area. Then, repeat the sequence of deliberately tightening the muscles, holding the tension for 10 seconds and releasing. This is a very quick and effective way for you to loosen yourself up right before that big game or even in between innings.

#7 USING IMAGERY FOR RELAXATION

You can also effectively calm yourself down by using your imagination to mentally take yourself to a calm, safe place. Sit quietly, close your eyes and imagine yourself going to a totally relaxing place like a favorite beach, mountainside, woods or vacation spot. Experience yourself comfortably enjoying this place in as much detail as possible, seeing, hearing and feeling everything that you would as if you were actually there. Allow yourself to stay in this calming place for 5 – 10 minutes at a time until you feel calm, relaxed and in control. Regular "visits" to this mental "relaxation room" will make it available to you under pressure, right before that big game or important tryout.

However, if you never consistently practice this exercise at home when you're completely relaxed, then you'll find that it won't be "open" and available for you when you need it the most under pressure.

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STEP #9

PREPARING YOURSELF TO PLAY LIKE A CHAMPION WHEN IT COUNTS THE MOST USING MENTAL REHEARSAL

Mental rehearsal is a very simple, yet powerful mental skill that you can regularly use to help you stay calm under competitive pressure, build confidence, quickly let go of mistakes, errors and bad breaks and more effectively play to your potential. Mental rehearsal or visualization is nothing more than deliberate mental practice where you imagine, in vivid detail, (seeing, hearing, feeling, smelling), playing that ideal game including having great at-bats, making crucial plays in the field, throwing accurately and powerfully, executing the perfect slide, etc. Your visualization can even include feelings of celebration and accomplishment after a great game.

Mental rehearsal works because what you vividly imagine stimulates the nerve-muscle connections involved in the actual movements. Repetitive stimulation of these connections forms a pathway for your muscles to follow once the actual movements are undertaken. In this way, mental rehearsal, when it's properly done, leaves you with a confident feeling of preparedness, like you've already been there. With sufficient practice, you can



fine-tune this mental skill to the point where you can consistently raise the level of your game.

Follow these simple guidelines to help you master the skill of mental rehearsal and better prepare you for those high pressured matches:

1. Always start your imagery sessions with several minutes of relaxation. Your imagery will be far more effective when you're completely relaxed. (**DO NOT** do imagery when you're anxious)

2. **DO NOT** use mental rehearsal too close to the actual start of your game. If you do, you will make yourself too nervous to play your best. Some athletes need to stop a day or two before the game. Others can use imagery right up until an hour or so before the actual start. Experiment to discover which time frame works best for you.

3. Make your imagery as vivid and detailed as possible including pictures, sounds, muscle feelings and even smells.

4. Have a specific goal in mind for your mental rehearsal sessions. For example, if you regularly get upset and hang onto your errors or bad at-bats, "practice" quickly letting these miscues go and following them up with a great play and/or a solid hit.

5. Try to feel what you'd be feeling as if you were actually up at the plate hitting, on the mound pitching or in the field, making a great catch and then a perfect throw. Your game imagery will be much more effective if you can step into the physical feelings of the play and "practice" these.

6. Have a beginning, middle and end to each of your sessions. The beginning can involve traveling to the game, your warm-up, pre- game ritual and the start and the first inning including your first at-bat. The middle could include scenes

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from the middle innings, again another at-bat and more great defensive plays in the field. The end could include hitting and fielding in the bottom of the last inning, making a game saving play or getting a game-winning hit. Be sure to include the post game celebration and feelings of excitement and accomplishment, etc.

7. Make your mental rehearsal sessions short. (10 minutes at the most including a 4-5 minute period of relaxation).

8. Always try to imagine what you want to have happen and how you want to feel, **NOT** what you're afraid will happen or don't want.

9. If your images turn negative at any point in your session, be patient and "rewind" them, replaying the scene again and again until they turn out the way that you want them to.



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Keep in mind that mental rehearsal is a learned skill. In the beginning, you may close your eyes and see nothing but a blank slate. Be patient and keep practicing. Just because you can't consciously see, feel or hear anything doesn't mean that your imagery isn't working. You are always making images unconsciously and these images are just as powerful and effective as the ones that you are consciously aware of. When you go to do an imagery session and can't "see" or "feel" anything, just think your way through what you want to be going on in as much detail as possible.

USING "COPING IMAGERY" TO EFFECTIVELY HANDLE STRESSFUL SITUATIONS BEFORE AND DURING YOUR GAMES

Mental rehearsal is a wonderful tool to help you learn to stay calm under pressure and to build confidence in your ability to handle stressors that in the past might have gotten you too nervous to perform your best. Let's say, for example, that having to face a certain opponent or pitcher would freak you out and undermine your confidence. Use your mental rehearsal session to vividly imagine yourself staying calm, cool and focused against this team and up at the plate against this pitcher. Imagine yourself feeling composed, playing well in the field and making good contact up at the plate. Similarly, if you tend to get too upset over bad calls from the umpire, mentally practice refocusing yourself immediately after an obvious bad call and playing with renewed concentration and intensity. If your problem is one of being too nervous pre-game/at-bat, then mentally practice staying relaxed and in control right before the start of the game or stepping into the batter's box feeling loose, confident and focused. Similarly if you have a bad habit of hanging onto your errors and then beating yourself up for them, "practice" quickly forgiving yourself, letting them go and playing strongly right after messing up.

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STEP#10

UTILIZING A “CHAMPIONSHIP GAME PLAN” TO PLAY LIKE A CHAMPION

Perhaps one of the biggest mental mistakes that baseball players make at their more pressured tryouts, tournaments or games is to take the wrong goals with them into these performances. What are the wrong goals? Anything related to outcome like, **WINNING, NEEDING TO BEAT A PARTICULAR OPPONENT, WANTING TO GO 4 FOR 4, WANTING TO PROVE TO THE COACH THAT YOU DESERVE THE STARTING SPOT, NOT WANTING TO DISAPPOINT MOM OR DAD**, etc. Outcome goals tend to distract you from the task at hand and get you too nervous and tight to play your best. Remember, your outcome goals are strictly a motivational tool for practice only! To perform your best when it counts the most you must learn to “carry” different goals onto the field with you. These goals, when focused on and accomplished, will **GUARANTEE** that you’ll achieve your outcome goals. These goals make up what I call a **CHAMPIONSHIP GAME PLAN**.

What is a Championship Game Plan? A Championship Game Plan is like a recipe for peak performance. Like any recipe, it has specific ingredients that must be uti-



lized in order to achieve the desired outcome. Like any recipe, when some of these “ingredients” are omitted, what you end up with will leave you with a “nasty taste” in your mouth! Look over the following mini-goals of this basic **CHAMPIONSHIP GAME PLAN** and see which ones will help you cook up one mean performance.



THE CHAMPIONSHIP GAME PLAN

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1. **STAY LOOSE & RELAXED** – The secret to playing your best when it counts the most lies in your ability to stay mentally and physically loose under pressure. Excessive pre-game/at-bat nervousness is the number one cause of choking and bad performance. Therefore it is absolutely critical that you have several relaxation tools in your mental toughness toolbox. Simply put, you need to know **HOW** to relax when the competitive pressure is turned up high. Things you can do pre-game/at-bat to actually achieve this state of relaxation: Control your breathing; stretch; listen to music; distract yourself with light or funny conversation with teammates; **DO NOT** focus on the importance of the



game; Use relaxation techniques. (See section, “Staying cool and calm in the clutch” for these).

2. **HAVE FUN** – One oftentimes overlooked, but critical ingredient in great performances is **FUN!** If you are having fun **BEFORE** and **WHILE** you play, then chances are good that you will remain loose enough to play your best. Too many athletes wait until after the game before deciding whether they had fun or not, i.e. “When I go 3 for 4 and drive in the winning run, that’s fun,” or “Let us win this game and then I’ll have fun,” etc. If you have to wait until after the outcome of the game before you can decide whether you’ve had fun or not, then you’ve got it **BACKWARDS!** You can’t play to your potential at **ANY LEVEL** unless you’re having fun **FIRST!** **FUN IS AN ABSOLUTE MUST IN ORDER FOR YOU TO DO YOUR BEST.** If you’re **NOT** having fun, then you won’t play well. So before the game, let yourself get into the challenge facing you. Get into hanging with your teammates, laughing and joking. Whatever is fun for you at the game or tournament, then you want to make sure that you’re doing it and enjoying yourself.

3. **STAY FOCUSED IN THE “NOW”** – You play your best when you can keep your concentration in the “now,” on the pitch that’s being thrown right now! If you are in the past or the future before or during a game, then you will always be a step or two behind. The only mental time zone where you have access to all your skills, bat speed, great reflexes and quickness is the **NOW.** Remember, **THE MOST IMPORTANT PLAY/PITCH IN ANY GAME IS THE ONE THAT YOU’RE INVOLVED IN RIGHT NOW!**

4. **WHEN YOU “TIME TRAVEL” (PAST OR FUTURE) RECOGNIZE THAT YOU’VE LEFT THE NOW AND QUICKLY AND GENTLY BRING YOUR FOCUS BACK TO THE NOW** - Remember, drifting won’t hurt you as long as you stay on top of it. When your focus lags behind or jumps ahead, quickly return it to the now. Each moment that you play where your focus is in the past or the future is a moment where you’re handicapping yourself, a time where you’re not paying attention and

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therefore a time when you will play way below your abilities!

5. PLAY YOUR OWN GAME/FOCUS ON YOU – Want to win the game, beat that annoying opponent and prove yourself to your coach and parents? Want to play the kind of baseball that you’re fully capable of? If you do, then you’ll stay focused on what **YOU** are doing and “play **YOUR** own game.” Being overly concerned with your opponent, teammates, the coaches, the crowd or what other people may think of you will mentally take you out of your game and cause you to perform poorly. Focus on **YOU!** Stay inside yourself.

6. WHEN YOUR FOCUS LEAVES YOU, RECOGNIZE YOU’RE DRIFTING AND QUICKLY AND GENTLY BRING YOUR FOCUS BACK TO YOU – If you find yourself preoccupied with someone else before or during your games/at-bats, your immediate job is to catch yourself and quickly return your focus back to you and what you’re doing in the moment. You can’t hit or field well if you’re mentally distracted by those around you.

7. KEEP TRACK OF THE “UC’S” (UNCONTROLLABLES) – Focusing on any uncontrollable either before or during your game will get you uptight, undermine your self-confidence and ruin your game. Your job going into those high pressured situations is to know what your “UC’S” are and to make sure that your focus stays away from them. If you should find yourself concentrating on an uncontrollable, quickly return your focus to what you are doing. Remember, you can always control how **YOU CHOOSE** to react to any uncontrollable.

8. USE LAST MINUTE NEGATIVE THINKING AND SELF-DOUBTS AS A NEUTRAL SIGNAL TO RELAX AND REFOCUS – Remember, last minute doubts and negativity are quite normal. When you hear their nasty little chatter in your ears right before an at-bat or crucial situation in the field, **RELAX!** Do **NOT** engage the negativity. Instead, immediately refocus your concentration on the task at hand. Allowing yourself to “jump in” to the negative thoughts will tend to get you “emotionally hijacked.” Negative thinking and doubts are nothing more than brain wave activity. They are **NOT** a prediction of what will happen.

Change the channel and refocus on the task at hand, this next pitch or play.

9. **DON'T THINK, JUST PLAY** – Playing great baseball is all about feel, flow and reacting and **NOT** about thinking. Thinking is hazardous to your health as a player. You can't think your way through a good at-bat. You have to get out of your own way and allow your muscle memory and instincts to take over. Before that big game/at-bat/play in the field, reassure yourself that you've paid your physical dues, that you've done everything that you can possibly do to prepare and then completely put your concentration on **FEEL** and **REACT**. Thinking always distracts you from the important task at hand and ties you in knots.

10. **TRUST AND LET IT HAPPEN** – If you have made an honest investment in your training, then that great game that you so desperately want is already inside of you as you read these words. How do you get that great performance to come out? You have to relax, trust your training, trust your coaching, trust your muscle memory and just let the game come to you. You don't need to force it. Just let it flow. This is what a great at-bat is all about. You hit the ball hard by not trying to hit it hard. Instead, you relax, see the ball and let the swing do its thing!

11. **USE FOCAL POINTS BEFORE AND DURING YOUR GAMES**
Since quickly catching your drifting focus and bringing it back is so important to mental toughness, it is absolutely critical that you have specific focal points and pre-performance rituals that you can return your concentration to. Know ahead of time what your pre-game, pre-at-bat and pre-play (depending upon your position in the field) rituals/focal points are. Have a specific pre-game ritual picked out ahead of time that you feel comfortable using. Your rituals help keep you confident and composed under pressure.

12. **FORGIVE YOURSELF FOR YOUR MISTAKES, BAD AT-BATS AND ERRORS, LEARN FROM THEM AND THEN LEAVE THEM IN THE PAST** – Understand that your success as an athlete is based on your failures. You can **NOT** become

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a champion without failing **ENOUGH!!!** Therefore, how you handle your failures, disappointments and losses is absolutely critical to how successful you'll ultimately become as a ball player. When you have a bad game, look for what you did wrong. **DON'T** waste your time and energy beating yourself up! Getting down on yourself has no constructive value whatsoever. Instead, learn from your mistakes and losses, forgive yourself for being human and then leave these disappointments in the **PAST** where they belong!

USING THE CHAMPIONSHIP GAME PLAN

Choose all or any number of the above goals that fit for you. Write them down on a piece of paper. Make several copies. Put one up on your wall or mirror in your bedroom, put one inside your locker at school and keep one in your bat bag. Look at these goals before your games. Remember their purpose. The game plan is designed to help you stay focused on what's important. After a game, take a few minutes to evaluate your performance in relation to this game plan. That is, ask yourself, "on a scale of 1 – 10, where 1 = not at all and 10 = a perfect job, how well did I accomplish each goal?" Answers of 7- 8 or less indicate the need for more improvement on that particular goal for your next game. Answers of 9 or 10 indicate that you executed that particular goal quite effectively. Remember, the way to get to that great performance is by following the goals of the **CHAMPIONSHIP GAME PLAN**.

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STEP #11

PLAYING YOUR ROLE ON THE TEAM TO THE VERY BEST OF YOUR ABILITY

As the sports psychologist for the University of Connecticut Huskies, I had an opportunity to work very closely with a number of the athletic teams for both the men and the women. UConn has especially made a name for itself as a national powerhouse in men's and women's basketball, men's and women's soccer, and their reputation as a strong football program is growing. I also worked very closely with their softball and baseball programs the years that I was there.

In my work with this D-1 school, I witnessed a very interesting phenomenon. In many of their sports, UConn attracts some of the best high school athletes in the country. Many of these athletes were superstars back in their home towns, garnering media attention, attracting huge crowds to their games and helping their teams win Conference and State titles. They came to UConn with the hopes of making an immediate contribution to their new team and continuing their athletic dominance on a larger, national stage.



For a number of these athletes however, they were met with a massive “culture shock.” They now found themselves on a team of superstars! No longer were they the obvious standout, with the team’s offense and defense constructed around them. For the first time in their athletic career they now had to fight just to make the starting line-up. In fact, for quite a few of these athletes, they had to experience what it was like to sit on the bench, to be a role player for the very first time in their life!

Quite a few of the athletes who didn’t make the starting line-up at UConn could have easily started at many other D-1 programs. However, because they chose to play at Connecticut, they now had to get used to sitting on the bench. No serious athlete wants to play this role on a team. You join a team to “play” ball, not to sit!

However, for a team to be successful, every athlete has an important role to play on the team. Fair or unfair, good or bad, this role is assigned to them by the coach. If a player is unhappy about his role and he “shares” his unhappiness with all those around him, the whole team suffers. Why? Because you can’t create a championship team without each athlete on that squad accepting his role and then playing it to the very best of his ability.

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What is the role of a support player? His job is to push the starters in practice and make them better while working on and improving his own skills. The role players keep the starters “honest.” Role players physically and emotionally challenge the starters on a daily basis. In my opinion, this is how one develops a National Championship team. I’ve watched this happen with both men’s and women’s basketball as well as with men’s and women’s soccer at UConn. For a team to be truly successful, everyone has to accept their role, respect everyone else’s role and then play their role to the fullest.



But let's be honest here. Being a role player is not much fun. In fact, it's by far the most difficult position to play on any team. It is frustrating, oftentimes boring and frequently demoralizing. You have to work just as hard, if not harder than all the starters, but you get no glory for your efforts. It seems that you work in obscurity. No one ever sees much of you outside of practice. However, if you truly would like to be a winner, then part of your job is to not only accept the role that the coach assigns you, but to try to play that role to the very best of your ability. Don't go kidding yourself into believing that just because you don't get into a game, that you're not of value to your team. Your worth, in my opinion, is of equal value to the athletes who get all the playing time.

What you want to do as a role player is to act like the champion that you are, to act like you are a valuable and contributing member of the squad. If some of the starters treat you disrespectfully, then know in your heart that they are simply too selfish and stupid to understand what a championship team is all about. When you sit the bench, keep your head up and in the game. Support your mates. Stay positive! Stay focused on the action and especially on what is going on in your position. You never know when your chance will come and when it does, you want to be ready for it. If you are truly miserable about your role on the team, then commit yourself to doing something about it both in practice and over the course of the off-season. Work harder. Strengthen your weaknesses. Get in better physical condition. Work on your hitting and fielding. Do whatever it takes to get better.

However, do **NOT** sit on the bench and show your unhappiness. Do **NOT** sit on the bench and criticize the coach in your head. Do not put a long face on and whine to your teammates about what a raw deal you're getting. This will only serve to make you unhappier and further distract you from the game. Remember, your job is to play ball. Your job is not to criticize or evaluate the coaching decisions. Be a winner, **NOT**

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a whiner!!!! Accept your role. Act like a champion and support the starters. Keep your head in the game. Don't lose heart. Use your frustration and disappointment to motivate you into working harder. Your time will eventually come.



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REMEMBER: Awareness is the key to change, the key to improvement. You have to know what you are doing wrong before you can correct it. Are you **AWARE** of your focus of concentration and self-talk when you sit the bench? What's your attitude like? Are you in the game or in your head being ticked off at the coach? Are you supporting your team or thinking that the person playing in front of you is nowhere as good as you? Spend a few minutes right now to **HONESTLY** answer these questions and rate the kind of role player you are.



(Use true (T) or false (F) answers)

1. ___ I spend a lot of time on the bench during games being angry and upset
2. ___ I think the coach is wrong in his assessment of me
3. ___ During games I question why certain athletes are playing and I'm not
4. ___ I frequently lose track of the game and drift off when I sit the bench
5. ___ My feeling is that if I can't play, why should I be on this team
6. ___ I typically resent the starters
7. ___ I'm willing to do anything for this team
8. ___ I believe if I work hard enough I'll eventually get my chance
9. ___ I actively support the starters during the game
10. ___ I see the point in working hard in practice even if I'm never going to play
11. ___ I understand and accept that my playing time is completely the coach's decision
12. ___ I am willing to be a role player if this is will help our team win

SCORING/INTERPRETATION: Assign a "0" value for each "T" you answered for questions 1 – 6 and a "1" value for each "F" you answered. Assign a "1" value for each "T" you answered for questions 7 – 12 and a "0" value for each "F" you answered.

The higher your score, the better you are attitude-wise as a role player. If you scored between 10 and 12 you have accepted your role and you're helping the team with your presence. This kind of attitude will also help you continue to improve as a player. However, if your score was below 6, then you need some serious attitude readjustment work. Your atti-

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tude is hurting your squad and will eventually hold you back in your development as a good player. Remember, you don't have to like being a role player. You don't have to like sitting on the bench. That's not the issue. No one likes not playing. The issue is learning to play that role well for the team, if that's the one you've been assigned. That's what winners do.

STEP #11



CONCLUSION

Once you get to that big game, important tryout or critical showcase, how well you play depends almost entirely on how mentally tough you are. Remember what I said when we started this program: “In games and when it really counts, baseball is 95% mental and 5% physical.” Don’t leave this all-important mental side of your game to chance. Your mind is far too powerful a force to leave untrained. Harness the awesome power of your mind today by beginning to systematically work on developing mental toughness. Use this workbook to strengthen your mental muscles, build your self-confidence and help you stay cool and calm in the clutch. Remember, you can’t play winning baseball without using your head. So start today to systematically develop the mind of a champion.



WORKSHEET #1

SELF-TALK AND BAD PERFORMANCES (BAD GAME #1)

What was your self-talk/thoughts

- 1).....the day of the game?
- 2).....during your warm-up?
- 3).....just before the game started?
- 4).....during your first at-bat?
- 5).....after making an error/getting out?
- 6).....when a teammate or coach yelled at you?
- 7).....when a call went against you?
- 8)facing a particularly talented pitcher?
- 9)If you struck out?
- 10)If you lost the game?

WORKSHEET #1

SELF-TALK AND BAD PERFORMANCES (BAD GAME #2)

What was your self-talk/thoughts

- 1).....the day of the game?
- 2).....during your warm-up?
- 3).....just before the game started?
- 4).....during your first at-bat?
- 5).....after making an error/getting out?
- 6).....when a teammate or coach yelled at you?
- 7).....when a call went against you?
- 8)facing a particularly talented pitcher?
- 9)If you struck out?
- 10)If you lost the game?

WORKSHEET #1

SELF-TALK AND BAD PERFORMANCES (BAD GAME #3)

What was your self-talk/thoughts

- 1).....the day of the game?
- 2).....during your warm-up?
- 3).....just before the game started?
- 4).....during your first at-bat?
- 5).....after making an error/getting out?
- 6).....when a teammate or coach yelled at you?
- 7).....when a call went against you?
- 8)facing a particularly talented pitcher?
- 9)If you struck out?
- 10)If you lost the game?

WORKSHEET #2

SELF-TALK AND GOOD PERFORMANCES (GOOD GAME #1)

What was your self-talk/thoughts

- 1).....the day of the game?
- 2).....during your warm-up?
- 3).....just before the game started?
- 4).....during your first at-bat?
- 5).....after making an error/getting out?
- 6).....when a teammate or coach yelled at you?
- 7).....when a call went against you?
- 8)....facing a particularly talented pitcher?
- 9)If you lost the game?

WORKSHEET #2

SELF-TALK AND GOOD PERFORMANCES (GOOD GAME #2)

What was your self-talk/thoughts

- 1).....the day of the game?
- 2).....during your warm-up?
- 3).....just before the game started?
- 4).....during your first at-bat?
- 5).....after making an error/getting out?
- 6).....when a teammate or coach yelled at you?
- 7).....when a call went against you?
- 8)....facing a particularly talented pitcher?
- 9)If you lost the game?

WORKSHEET #2

SELF-TALK AND GOOD PERFORMANCES (GOOD GAME #3)

What was your self-talk/thoughts

- 1).....the day of the game?
- 2).....during your warm-up?
- 3).....just before the game started?
- 4).....during your first at-bat?
- 5).....after making an error/getting out?
- 6).....when a teammate or coach yelled at you?
- 7).....when a call went against you?
- 8)....facing a particularly talented pitcher?
- 9)If you lost the game?

WORKSHEET #3

CONCENTRATION AND GOOD PERFORMANCES (GOOD GAME #1)

Where was your focus of concentration.....

- 1)....the day of the game?
- 2)....during warm-up?
- 3)....just before your first at-bat?
- 4)....after you made an error/mistake?
- 5)....after you got a hit?
- 6)....when the umpire made a bad call?
- 7)....after your opponent made a great play or got a big hit?
- 8)....in between innings?
- 9)just before you made a great play?
- 10)during the last inning?
- 11) ...facing a really tough pitcher?
- 12)Trying to get that final out?

WORKSHEET #3

CONCENTRATION AND GOOD PERFORMANCES (GOOD GAME #2)

Where was your focus of concentration.....

- 1)....the day of the game?
- 2)....during warm-up?
- 3)....just before your first at-bat?
- 4)....after you made an error/mistake?
- 5)....after you got a hit?
- 6)....when the umpire made a bad call?
- 7)....after your opponent made a great play or got a big hit?
- 8)....in between innings?
- 9)just before you made a great play?
- 10)during the last inning?
- 11) ...facing a really tough pitcher?
- 12)Trying to get that final out?

WORKSHEET #3

CONCENTRATION AND GOOD PERFORMANCES (GOOD GAME #3)

Where was your focus of concentration.....

- 1)....the day of the game?
- 2)....during warm-up?
- 3)....just before your first at-bat?
- 4)....after you made an error/mistake?
- 5)....after you got a hit?
- 6)....when the umpire made a bad call?
- 7)....after your opponent made a great play or got a big hit?
- 8)....in between innings?
- 9)just before you made a great play?
- 10)during the last inning?
- 11) ...facing a really tough pitcher?
- 12)Trying to get that final out?

WORKSHEET #4

CONCENTRATION AND BAD PERFORMANCES (BAD GAME #1)

Where was your focus of concentration.....

- 1)....the day of the game?
- 2)....during warm-up?
- 3)....just before the game started?
- 4)....after you made an error?
- 5)....after a bad at-bat?
- 6)....when the umpire made a bad call?
- 7)....after getting thrown out by your opponent?
- 8)....in between innings?
- 9)....just before you struck out/committed an error?
- 10)....when the game got close?
- 11)....having to face a tough pitcher?
- 12)....trying to get the final out?

WORKSHEET #4

CONCENTRATION AND BAD PERFORMANCES (BAD GAME #2)

Where was your focus of concentration.....

- 1)....the day of the game?
- 2)....during warm-up?
- 3)....just before the game started?
- 4)....after you made an error?
- 5)....after a bad at-bat?
- 6)....when the umpire made a bad call?
- 7)....after getting thrown out by your opponent?
- 8)....in between innings?
- 9)....just before you struck out/committed an error?
- 10)....when the game got close?
- 11)....having to face a tough pitcher?
- 12)....trying to get the final out?

WORKSHEET #4

CONCENTRATION AND BAD PERFORMANCES (BAD GAME #3)

Where was your focus of concentration.....

- 1)....the day of the game?
- 2)....during warm-up?
- 3)....just before the game started?
- 4)....after you made an error?
- 5)....after a bad at-bat?
- 6)....when the umpire made a bad call?
- 7)....after getting thrown out by your opponent?
- 8)....in between innings?
- 9)....just before you struck out/committed an error?
- 10)....when the game got close?
- 11)....having to face a tough pitcher?
- 12)....trying to get the final out?

WORKSHEET #5

DO YOU PLAY BETTER IN PRACTICE THAN YOU DO IN GAMES?

(Compare and contrast)

PRACTICE

GAMES

What do you tend to focus on.....

- 1)....before you get to the field?
- 2)....during warm-ups?
- 3)just before the start of play (game or practice)
- 4)when you begin to feel tired?
- 5)when you commit an error or have a bad at-bat?
- 6)when you get outplayed by teammates or opponents?
- 7)when the coach criticizes you?
- 8)when your throw isn't going where it should?
- 9) How much do you concentrate on other players?
- 10) How much does your focus drift to the future & outcome?
- 11) How much do you compare yourself?

12) How much time do you spend focusing on what you think you are doing poorly?

13) How easily distracted are you?

WORKSHEET #6

SIGNS OF GOOD NERVOUS

GREAT GAME #1

Physical signs
(in body)

Mental signs
(thinking/focusing)

Behavioral signs
(how I acted pre-match)

GREAT GAME #2

Physical signs

Mental signs

Behavioral signs

WORKSHEET #7

SIGNS OF BAD (OR NOT ENOUGH) NERVOUS

BAD GAME #1

Physical signs
(in body)

Mental signs
(thinking/focusing)

Behavioral signs
(how I acted pre-match)

BAD GAME #2

Physical signs

Mental signs

Behavioral signs

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