MANAGEMENT & CAREERS

What You Can Learn From MLB's Mental-Skills Coaches

Baseball's psychology specialists explain how the advice they give All-Star players can also work at the office

By Sue Shellenbarger
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No one likes making a mistake when colleagues or clients are watching, or getting negative feedback in a meeting.

Imagine making an error in front of 50,000 booing spectators while your latest performance stats flash in giant letters on a Jumbotron overhead.

Anyone struggling at work might take a few pointers from Major League Baseball's mental-skills coaches. Few jobs are as pressure-packed as pro baseball. But many of the challenges players face are challenges anyone could relate to.

As in the workplace, the game's great myth is that talent always wins. In reality, athletes' hidden game, the mental one, can override some deficits in skill, says Bob Tewksbury, a former All-Star pitcher and current mental-skills coach for the San Francisco Giants.

That's why 26 of the 30 MLB teams employ sports psychologists or mental-skills coaches, up from about 20 eight years ago, says Charlie Maher, president of the Professional Baseball Performance Psychology Group, a professional organization, and a sport and performance psychologist for the Cleveland Indians.

Here's what some of those big-league coaches say about staying sharp and happy in your career:

Tune out the crowd noise

Players must develop the ability on the mound or in the batter's box to block out distractions, says Mr. Tewksbury, author of "Ninety Percent Mental," a book on mental skills. Thoughts tend to race under intense stress, a natural response that can hurt performance.

Mental-skills coach Bob Tewksbury, right, a former All-Star pitcher seen here with Boston Red Sox star David Ortiz in 2008, says MLB players' mental game makes most of the difference between success and failure. He now works for the San Francisco Giants. PHOTO: JOEL PAGE/ASSOCIATED PRESS

Ken Ravizza, a mental-skills coach for the Chicago Cubs, teaches players to stay aware of their mental state by imagining an inner traffic signal: It's green when your body is calm and the mind focused. It turns yellow when your heart rate and blood pressure start rising and you begin having trouble focusing. It flashes red when you start believing your self-doubts. Your muscles tighten and you lose control.

Marcus Jones dislocated his ankle so badly in a collision with a runner on first base during a college game that the bottom of his foot turned upward. He started to panic until a coach, using the stoplight technique, grabbed his shoulders and ordered him to "Stop! Breathe," he says. He fixed his gaze on the coach and calmed down, and the pain eased, says Mr. Jones, who went on to play for the Oakland A's. In his current job as general manager of an Anaheim, Calif., sports-training facility, he heeds his internal red light anytime he notices his frustration mounting.

Dr. Ravizza also has players choose a focal point to look at during tense moments, such as a foul pole or spot on their glove, and imbue it with special meaning. Tell yourself, "I have worked hard and I belong here," says Dr. Ravizza, co-author with Tom Hanson of "Heads-Up Baseball 2.0." A public speaker or office worker might do the same, with a piece of artwork, a photo or a note on her desk.

Sports psychologist Ken Ravizza, seen here at the Chicago Cubs' spring training in 2016, works with the team on blocking out distractions and focusing on what they can control. PHOTO: CHICAGO TRIBUNE/TNS/GETTY IMAGES

Make productive outs

The best batters in pro baseball fail seven of every 10 times at bat. Dr. Ravizza counsels players to dissect their missteps step-by-step. "Failing can be better than succeeding if you use it as a chance to work on what you need to learn," he says.

Consider writing a one-page paper comparing your thoughts, feelings and actions when you're doing great vs. when you're struggling, Dr. Ravizza says. Mr. Tewksbury kept a journal, writing down what he did well and poorly in each trip to the mound.

Bobby Kingsbury, a former minor-league outfielder for the Pittsburgh Pirates, learned from mental-skills coach Geoff Miller to use failures at bat as a chance to analyze what went wrong. In his current job as a principal for a Cleveland area private-equity firm, he helps review hundreds of potential investments a year. "When you have that many at-bats," he says, "you learn from your mistakes, you move on and you don't do it again."

Take a two-strike approach to life

Hitters with two strikes against them seldom get the pitch they want, says Mr. Miller, a mental-skills coach for the Philadelphia Phillies. He coaches players to take whatever comes their way and make the best of it.

The same strategy works in everyday life. "Starbucks is out of my coffee, or we're having a meeting and the internet is down, or someone isn't calling and I don't have all the information I need," says Mr. Miller, author of a mental-skills book, "Intangibles."

Jose Mota learned to visualize tough plays before games as an infielder for the San Diego Padres and Kansas City Royals. He uses the technique, learned from Dr. Ravizza, in his current job as a

Los Angeles Angels TV announcer. He sees himself responding to events and sharing opinions and anecdotes in a relaxed way. “I know that I’m prepared, no matter what comes up next,” he says.

Remember to love the game

Mr. Miller counsels Phillies players to navigate what he calls the job paradox—the tendency to turn what you love to do into a job, then put so much pressure on yourself to move up or make money that you stop liking it. He coaches athletes to play baseball like they’re playing ping pong: “Battle on every pitch and compete, and have fun at the same time,” he says.

Jonathan Fader, a former mental-skills coach for the New York Mets, coached a self-employed trader who worried so much about hitting his monthly profit targets that his performance began to slide. He advised him to let go of the outcome and focus on attaining the mental state he hoped to experience after he succeeded—calm, masterful and capable of quick, rational decisions.

The trader created a new set of performance measures to rate his own enjoyment and calm, and began grading himself on those yardsticks several times a day, says Dr. Fader, author of “Life as a Sport.” By improving his performance on measures he could control, the trader began netting better monthly results.

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