



Growing Champions *for Life*

To Win at the Head Game Athletes Turn To Psychotherapy By Ameli Raino

That pitch was terrible, Shooter Hunt would think to himself. Terrible.

As the Twins minor leaguer stood on the mound, the expectant crowd waiting, a thousand thoughts ran through his mind. Most were negative jabs at himself for the two or three spots he had missed, and the pressure hung in the balance.



The feeling would simmer. This is so bad, he'd think. Now the whole inning's going to be bad, and the season. I'll be out of baseball. **I might as well dig my grave and die.**

The lights at Pohlman Field in Beloit, Wis., seemed brighter than just a dense cluster of florescent bulbs; shining on Hunt's forehead was the unforgiving glare of spotlight.

But instead of digging his grave and jumping in it, during spring training of 2009 Hunt started talking to local sports psychotherapist Rick Aberman, a figure in an industry that has exploded into relevancy on the sports scene in recent years.

The trend isn't talked about. Of the 20-plus athletes spoken with for this story, nearly all had embraced such a service at some point in their careers, but their cautious tones and skeptical dialogues all repeated the same thing: Perhaps the most dramatically expanding phenomenon in baseball is doing so with very little chatter. But behind closed doors and in quiet conversations, **the idea of sports psychology is spreading like wildfire.**

"[Baseball] is an alpha-male culture," said Hunt, whose first reaction to interviewing for this story was "Oh no," he said. "Getting mental help is not something you want to readily admit. But when you live or die every day, it gets to be a lot."

Getting Help

With as many stresses as players have to deal with -- the media, the fans, the repetition, physical injuries, personal expectations -- most sports psychologists emphasize simplification. The techniques include breathing exercises, positive self talk, visualization and basic talk therapy.

"There's no magic elixir," performance enhancement coach Robert Weinberg said. "These things have to be worked on, just like physical skills. But most issues are not psychological. Athletes are regular people. They get anxious, lose concentration."



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Those normal feelings are augmented in a sport that plays up to 162 games in a season, and where failure is a prevalent occurrence for **even the great athletes.**

In the past, skeptics have put emphasis on the problems of proving the success of sports psychology. With so many variables involved, how could one determine whether it was a psychologist who improved a pitcher's ERA, or a new glove, a new girlfriend or a new arm motion? But players seem much less concerned with measuring successful effects than with the psychological reaction to failure.

"So many kids grow up now and they never fail," said Jack Llewellyn, a sports psychologist who helped put the industry on the map when he worked with a young John Smoltz in a highly publicized case. "We've tried to create an error-free environment, **and now we have the inability to deal with adversity.**"

Said Gophers baseball coach John Anderson: "Eventually, you're going to face failure. That's what is so fascinating about the science of success. Within success, you have a lot of failures. But people only see the end product, they don't see the process."

Many times, learning to deal with failure -- or, as the athletes describe it, training yourself to let go of mistakes and view each game, swing or pitch as a singular, disconnected event translates into success as well.



"It's not like real complicated; when people are happier they do better," Aberman said. "These are talented athletes, and I just look at the **whole person rather than the behavioral change.** Personal things in life could be getting in the way."

But regardless of the effects on the field, psychologists are easing the sanity of athletes already under a great deal of pressure.

For Hunt, who now pitches for the Class A Fort Myers (Fla.) Miracle, it's a slow improvement. The righthander's ERA sits at 6.02, albeit an improvement from last season's Midwest and Gulf League combined ERA of 10.19. But not every repercussion can be measured with a tidy statistic.

"The biggest result I see is in the way I fail," Hunt said. "It's easy when things are going well, but now, I have a better ability to bounce back from failure. It makes it a lot easier to sleep at night."

"It makes it a lot easier to live."



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Giving it a Chance

When they arrive for practice, Gophers baseball players walk out to the outfield, and all lie down on their backs in the grass, close their eyes and practice breathing through their bellies, watching their stomach muscles rise and fall as the air spills out of their nostrils.

The “mental” practice is followed by positive self-talk and visualization exercises. *It’s a part of every practice.*

“I had never heard of anything like it before,” said junior AJ Pettersen, who is playing shortstop in the Cape Cod League this summer. “A lot of guys immediately thought, ‘This is stupid, why do I need this?’ But if guys stick with it, most of them buy into it.

“People don’t many negative themselves while once and it’s

Pettersen through a after being draft after his

“I had a really he said. “I started wondering what’s are people going to think of me? Sometimes it really gets out of control.”



even realize how things they say to playing. You get out ‘What if I go 0-5?’”

remembered fighting sophomore slump eligible for the freshman season.

tough time with it,” spiraling down, going to happen, what

The Gophers, with the aid of Anderson and Aberman, have taken control, making mental practice as much a normalcy as hitting the batting cages.

“It means a lot, just being able to talk to each other about it,” senior Gophers player Cullen Sexton said. “Everyone deals with it ... and it’s a real competitive advantage for us. But outside of the team [with other baseball players], it’s the kind of thing that really can’t come up in conversation still.”

But regardless of whether the idea is spoken boisterously, with a whisper or not at all in clubhouses, the concept is gaining steam in a sport that once shunned the practice as “weak.” Still, said Aberman, **it has a long way to go.**

“Baseball is at the forefront of addressing the mental health needs of its athletes right now,” he said. “And they’re still so behind the scenes, it’s unbelievable.”