

# Psyching Yourself In

WHILE MORE ATHLETES THAN EVER ARE BENEFITING FROM **SPORTS PSYCHOLOGY** TECHNIQUES LIKE VISUALIZATION, MANY STILL DISMISS IT AS “PSYCHOBABBLE.” BUT UNDERSTANDING HOW TO TRAIN YOUR MIND CAN HELP YOU ON THE FIELD AND IN THE GAME OF LIFE.

By Eric Buttermann

PERSONAL GROWTH

LIVING WELL

It's the ultimate understatement to say that the pressure of being a professional athlete can be intense (and that fact isn't offset by making gobs of money). Your every mistake is magnified, the fans want you to be perfect, the front office expects you to live up to every penny of your contract and the media is always hounding you. So with all that macro-pressure surrounding you, it's sometimes even tougher dealing with the micro-pressure — when even making a simple free throw or tossing a baseball on target becomes a challenge. Remember when second basemen Steve Sax and Chuck Knoublach couldn't throw the ball to first base?

You couldn't tell those athletes that the mind has nothing to do with being successful in sports. If the idea of taking that last-second shot with the game on the line rattles you or you keep making the difficult catch but find the on-target throws from the quarterback don't stick on your hands, you need to know why indulging in some sports psychology may be as important as any piece of equipment you take to the field.

Although sports psychology has made great strides among pro athletes, there are still many who still consider it psychobabble. But Karlene Sugarman, sports psychology consultant and author of *Winning The Mental Way*, says that those who choose to embrace the tool could “babble” all the way to the bank. “The physical tools are going to even out at the professional level because every player is outstanding,” says Sugarman. “Now athletes are looking for the extra edge.” One of those edges is the ability to come through in crunch time, and even though Sugarman doesn't like to use the term “choke,” she will admit many athletes are too concerned with their



performance with the game on the line.

“What people call ‘choking’ is a complex thing, but to simplify it's when an athlete perceives a moment as being more important than just a regular game. The interpretation of that is that you need to do more, but by doing that you have more stress and anxiety — your muscles are tight and your mind races. Psychologists want to help you become a non-thinker. The goal is to be able to let everything happen — we quiet your mind so you can let your body do what it's been trained to do all its life.”

For former NFL All-Pro placekicker

Nick Lowery, there were a few times in his career when his body and mind didn't connect. For example, Lowery had made more than 20 field goals in a row when he lined up for a last-minute 52-yard kick against the Miami Dolphins during the 1990 AFC Wild Card Playoff game. “I had a perfect angle and I just missed it,” recalls Lowery, who now hosts a radio show on Satellite radio called *Headgames*, which deals with sports psychology issues (see our story on Lowery's show on page 76). Lowery put together another 20-plus field goal streak the year after his playoff



game miss. The difference, says Lowery, was his mind.

“I worked with Dr. Andrew Jacobs about filling myself up with confident thoughts,” he explains. “You can’t just think about the things on the field, but what you have to take care of off the field — family, love, the people that matter. By improving the other parts of our life it gives us better focus on our job.”

“You have to first realize that you’re human,” Lowery continues. “Joe Montana, Michael Jordan, they all had times where they failed. It’s a part of life. There’s a computer in your brain that

knows the perfect kick, the best golf swing. You’ve done it before. You just have to look at a pressure situation being the same as what you face on the practice field.”

But even though letting go works, that doesn’t necessarily mean taking kid gloves to those with batting gloves, says Rick Wolff, a book editor who played minor league baseball in the 1970s and was a psychologist for the Cleveland Indians in the ‘90s. Wolff cites what he learned from his mentor, psychologist Harvey Dorfman. “On the one hand Harvey would walk out in a baseball uniform to build a rapport with the players,” Wolff recalls. “On the other hand, he’d say, ‘You get paid millions to be a big leaguer and you’re not getting the job done. Let’s deal with it!’ Some athletes don’t like that approach but others have been coddled their whole lives and respond to someone who’s finally honest with them.”

Still, Wolff notes that a good psychologist will adjust their style to mesh with the player’s. “Athletes need to look for someone who they can connect with and trust.”

Wolff, who believes his ability to hit fungoes and throw batting practice help him create a bond with players, thinks that athletes are concerned that doctors just don’t “get” the pro’s experience. “There aren’t many people who can say they truly understand what these guys are going through,” he says. “It makes it hard for them to let people in, especially when they’ve been told their whole life that they need to be in control. That’s what being a great athlete is all about — coming up with a performance that few can accomplish.”

But not everyone is so positive about the benefits of sports psychology. Dr.

Roland Carlson, who is Chairman of the American Board of Psychology in New York City, claims that many methods are unproven and devotes much of his time to dispelling what he sees as myths.

“The ‘holy grail’ of sports psychology is visualization and mental imagery, but I believe a lot of it is garbage,” Carlson says. “Let’s say you’re a batter and you’re told to visualize what you have always practiced — hitting, fielding — even if you can do visualization correctly there’s no empirical evidence saying that will lead to enhanced performance. Only 30 percent of athletes can do visualization processing right because that’s the amount of people who have the ability to be hypnotized.”

Wolff disagrees, believing it’s not so difficult to talk people into and out of fears: “Here’s an example: when you walk down a flight of stairs, which foot goes forward first? Really think about it... Now when you go down stairs later you may find yourself stumbling or finding it more difficult than usual. That’s because I’ve planted an idea that could make you overthink things. We do it to ourselves all the time.”

Regardless of the psychologist you work with, most will agree that an athlete’s best chance for success is to have an open mind with their practitioner. “Athletes need to be accountable and take ownership for the problems they’re having,” says Sugarman. “They also need to be open to trying everything as opposed to giving one exercise a try and then abandoning sports psychology right away if the first thing doesn’t work. You didn’t become a world-class athlete in a day, so how can you expect to master your mind overnight? **OT**