

The Secret to Mental Toughness

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Recently, a friend asked me about how important mental toughness is in a ball player and whether that can be taught to a ballplayer. He mentioned that it would be an interesting article that could help many ball players. I know he was correct because in my many years of teaching the game, most of the concerns parents had were about what was going on in their child's head when playing. Common statements like , "It's in his head," or "She gets psyched out," or "He's so nervous," or "She is not aggressive," or "He doesn't want it" addressed the idea that something crazy was going on between their child's ears, which was causing them to perform poorly. After all, "They can do it in practice, but not in games," another common statement implied that it must be in the player's head. Additionally, Sports TV analysts are constantly telling the audience what they think athletes are feeling in a particular situation. "Oh, that was definitely the Tiger effect, that is why he missed that shot" or "He was looking for a fast ball on that pitch and guessed wrong" or "He was scared of running into the wall for the catch" and on and on. It is common nature to think that there is something going on in a player's head, especially when something goes wrong in their performance.

My first thought when thinking of an answer to my friend's question was to reflect on my playing days and wonder if I was mentally tough. I don't believe any player can reach the Major League level without being mentally tough, but trying to define mental toughness in sports is not easy. I decided to travel down the yellow brick road in

my mind on a quest to define the key ingredient to developing mental toughness. I must point out though that most readers will probably be disappointed with my conclusion, but there is good news associated with the secret ingredient. First, I identified some of the concepts that are often associated with mental toughness. I thought of the following:

1. *Love of the Game – a must.*
2. *Never Give Up Attitude – oh yea, that's it.*
3. *Focused – for sure.*
4. *Aggressiveness – usually good.*
5. *An ability to calm the mind (lack of nervousness) – sure nerves are bad, I would guess.*
6. *Confidence – that has to be the key.*

These are all desired attributes for athletes, so the secret of mental toughness has to be one of these. I will use my experiences to decide the key to mental toughness.

Love of the game is obviously important, but unfortunately I don't believe it is the secret. I have seen many teammates and kids I've coached who absolutely loved playing but they were not always mentally tough. Something got in the way? What was that something that unfortunately caused failure and disappointment to overcome them to the point where their mental toughness was compromised?

The same goes for a "never give up" and totally focused player. All their hard work, determination and concentrated efforts did not always get them to the level they wanted to

play. Their careers ended because of the missing “secret.”

Additionally, aggressive players usually seem to appear mentally tough, but they may be masking insecurities with their aggressive nature. Also, passive and patient players are often equally tough.

OK, the secret must be one of the next two concepts. The most nervous I have ever been golfing was the day I shot the best round of my life, and believe me, I am not a good golfer. The nervous feeling never went away during the round but that didn't seem to matter. I was playing the round of my life. How did that happen? Well, the answer to this lies in the secret (revealed below) and it is not confidence. In my book, *The Making of a Hitter*, I give readers a sense of my failures and successes as a major league hitter. In the book, I explain how I was able to reach and have some level of success in the major leagues without one of the ingredients usually associated with mental toughness and success. I basically played without confidence. Upon further reflection, I did not play with confidence at any level of baseball.

So where does that leave me? With the secret.

In my opinion the key to mental toughness is 100% sound fundamentals. See, I mentioned you would be disappointed with my key to mental toughness. Give me great fundamentals at a skill and I will take my chances with nervousness, lack of confidence, anxiousness, etc. Does that mean that I won't “choke” from time to time? No, but give me the fundamentals and see if people don't suddenly start to say how mentally tough I appear to be. Albert Pujols is considered mentally tough. Why? First, because he has great hitting fundamentals and secondly, he can repeat those fundamentals in tough situations. Combine the fundamentals with

the other attributes talked about and you have greatness. The point to be made is that players can succeed, if and only if, they have very good fundamentals. Many of the other attributes will come along the way.

I mentioned above that there is good news to the secret answer. The good news is that mental toughness can be taught by improving players' fundamentals. The better the fundamentals, the better chance a player has of succeeding, usually resulting in more fun, increased confidence and a desire to work hard. Parents will be amazed by how a player's mental approach improves when their fundamentals improve. To repeat, the best way to help a young player's thoughts (mental game) is to help them develop the best fundamentals they are capable of.

For an example of this, good hitting fundamentals allow batters to foul off tough pitches. They may have the same focus and determination as a player with bad hitting fundamentals, but their ability to foul off the pitches because of better hitting mechanics make them “appear” to be mentally tough. The TV analyst then comments about what a good at-bat the player is having, how determined they are, and what a tough out they are. Agreed, but most important is that the player's good fundamentals allowed them to have the good at-bat. Hitters with less impressive fundamentals strike out and are not considered as mentally tough.

Now that I have identified the secret, I will further explain a few of my points from above. The day I had the best golf round of my life, my swing mechanics were working to as close to perfection as I have ever had them. It all “clicked” and although I was nervous and didn't feel like I was handling my nerves very well, my golf swing was “there.” Great results just happened.

How did I reach the major leagues without confidence? To make a long story short, the reason I lacked confidence was that I did not know the correct fundamentals of the game. For whatever reason, I did not know what I was doing or how I was doing what I was doing. Because of this lack of understanding of how to do things, I felt “out of control,” which led to a lack of confidence.

How was I successful? It gets back to good fundamentals. I just wish I knew and believed that when I played. One ingredient which allows control is knowledge, and a lack of knowledge definitely puts a player at a disadvantage. I know of so many players who have had great ability but never came across the knowledge to put them in a position to succeed. That is unfortunate. Actually, not having knowledge of how one does something is more common than you think. Many of the great players “just do it” without really knowing how to explain what they are doing or how they do it. There is a quote I have read from one of the great hitters (I don’t recall who) when asked what his secret was he replied, “I see the ball, then I hit the ball.” Their ability, hard work and fundamentals make it possible to perform well.

Also, trying to figure out what is in a player’s head and what they are thinking is impossible. After working with players whose parents thought their problem was in their head, I recognized fundamental faults that were actually preventing the player from succeeding. Once they addressed these fundamentals with the knowledge of the correct way and they put in the practice time, their performance greatly improved and their parents no longer thought they possessed a mental block in their head. Many parents also would come full circle and believe their kid was mentally tough, and it

could all be attributed to better fundamentals. The following are suggested things for players, coaches and parents to do so players can reach their potential and become fundamentally sound. Oops, I meant to become “mentally tough.”

1. *Have players see a respected, knowledgeable coach to find out the player’s strengths, weaknesses and ways of working on weaknesses.*
2. *Begin working on skills at least 6 weeks before the start of practice and gradually increase the work load each week leading up to the season.*
3. *Begin teaching basic fundamentals at a young age without being overbearing with instruction, of course.*
4. *Use good training aids when affordable and available. For example, using and stressing the use of a batting tee to hitters of every age can make all the difference.*
5. *Remember, the famous quote from an unknown author, “A little bit of knowledge is a dangerous thing” – knowledge of the how and why to do things can lead to increased confidence.*
6. *Learn as many quality drills as possible and perform them correctly, especially drills that address the player’s biggest faults. When a drill is good it will force a player to do a skill more efficiently.*
7. *Use practice time like a golfer uses the driving range – before games for getting loose and for developing grooved actions and after games for making adjustments.*
8. *Challenging players is beneficial for improvement and for avoiding boredom with practice. Over challenging where frustration appears is not good though.*

9. Contests can also be good as teaching tools and for fun.
10. Game-like situation practice is very productive. The more times a player feels like they have been in a particular situation the better chance of success when they are actually in that situation in a real game.
11. Remember, it is better to do less practice correctly, than to do more incorrectly.
12. Also, to change or develop a new skill usually requires much repetition – it doesn't just happen.
13. Praise players' good practice sessions ("Now you are ready") and downplay their inconsistent practice sessions ("Hey, it's just practice").

Simply put, there is no substitute for good fundamentals. Incorrect fundamentals will show up over the long season or as a player moves up in age. Finally, it is necessary to remember that it is easier to start new habits than to break habits that have been ingrained for years. The sooner parents get kids on the path to good fundamentals the better and the greater likelihood of future success. Best of luck.



Since retiring from professional baseball in 1987 Jack Perconte has worked with youth baseball in the Chicagoland ever since. He has worked with numerous young players who have gone on to play in the collegiate and professional ranks.

Teaching youth baseball and softball has led to the writing of "**The Making of a Hitter**," Jack's first of many books that deal with helping coaches and parents in youth baseball. The baseball tips found can only come from a coach who has worked with thousands of baseball and softball players of all ages. When you hear words like "humane," "practical," "fun," "insightful," "gold mine," and "home run" to describe this book, you begin to see the scope of the baseball instruction and baseball tips contained in **The Making of a Hitter**.

Jack maintains several blogs and websites where he offers practical suggestions for making ball players of all ages the best they can be.

- BaseballHittingLessons.com
- Blog: BaseballHittingLessons.com/baseball
- Blog: PositiveParentingInSports.com
- YouTube (search for *Jack Perconte*)
- Jack also provides monthly tips in *Jack's Hot Corner* on BaseballStatsTracker.com

The Making of a Hitter and Jack's latest book, **Raising an Athlete: How to Instill Confidence, Build Skills and Inspire a Love of Sport** are both available for purchase at BaseballHittingLessons.com.