

Baseball Agents: How To Help Your Players Be More Confident and Consistent

By Tom Hanson, Ph.D.

co-author of best-selling “Heads-Up Baseball: Playing the Game One Pitch at a Time”

**How important is your players’
mental game to their success?**

**How important is your players’
mental game to YOUR success?**

In 2001, I conducted a survey of more than 80 professional baseball players, asking them what they would most like to learn. The second most cited response was “confidence.” Players feel that their performance rises and falls with their level of confidence, so it was not a surprise to see it rank so highly.

The number one response – beating confidence by more than 2 to 1 – was “consistency.” General Managers agree, saying that most players in their organization can play in the Big Leagues for a night or even a week, but GMs are looking for players whose talent and skill show up on the field at the Major League level every night.

Although the mental game is getting increasing attention from some teams, **there is still a big gap between the importance of the mental game and how much help players get in this area.** Because of the lack of knowledge on the part of most coaches and organizations, players are left to deal with the most important element of their success on their own.

Consistency and confidence are mental game skills. Just like physical skills, mental skills are acquired through practice. The biggest difference between mental and physical skills is that there are many excellent coaches of the technical and physical aspects of the game, but very few people know how to help baseball players learn mental skills.

As an agent, you play many roles in the life of your clients, one of which is sport psychologist. If you are a successful agent, you likely have either excellent natural ability to help your players’ confidence and focus or have made a study of the mental game. Either way, the mental game is not your specialty area.

I’ve studied confidence and consistency in baseball players for the last 18 years, including interviewing greats like Hank Aaron, Nolan Ryan, Pete Rose, and Tommy John on how they were so good for so long. I’ve also coached hundreds of professional and amateur players who wanted to be more mentally tough.

In this article, I’ll share some of the key ideas and tools in an effort to **help you help your clients play confidently and consistently by choice, instead of by chance.** I’ll give you some guidelines on the two main skills of mental game coaching – **asking questions and listening.**

Player vs. Victim

The first thing to listen for when you talk with a player is whether he is being a “Player” or a “Victim.” From my experience, this is THE starting point: If he’s not approaching the game from the perspective of a “Player,” he has no chance of being consistent, and his confidence is left purely to chance.

A “Victim” takes an “Outside – In” approach. He lets external circumstances determine his internal state. A Victim rides what I call the “Results Rollercoaster” – his confidence goes up and down with his most recent statistics. When the hits are falling, he’s “The Man” -- confident, focused and upbeat. But when a couple of “0-fers” come along, his spirits dive so fast you want to throw up your hands and scream!

A Victim focuses on things he can’t control. Batters cannot control whether or not they get a hit. They can do everything right and hit a ball directly at a fielder, or they can get called out on a pitch that was six inches outside.

Pitchers can’t control getting batters out – they can break a bat and have it turn into a bloop double or watch a double play ground ball take a bad hop over their shortstop’s head.

Of course, no player controls whether he moves up to the next level of play, but Victims spend considerable time on this one. In fact, Victims waste a lot of their energy on external circumstances.

Since external circumstances are outside of their control, Victims have no chance of being consistent. As long as they take this excuse-making approach to the game, the majority of their talent will remain

locked inside them and won’t show up on the field.

A “Player,” on the other hand, takes in “Inside-Out” approach. He chooses for himself how he is going to be. Think of Jeter, Clemens, A-Rod, and Schilling. These guys take what is inside them and pour it out onto the field each day. True professionals determine what qualities they will demonstrate each day – confidence, focus, determination, positive attitude – rather than letting what happens around them determine their mental state.

Of course external circumstances affect the game, but **Players focus their energy on things they can control.** They learn to generate from within the focus and feelings they know lead to their best performances, rather than letting random events determine their internal state. Since they see themselves as the source of their own performance, they learn to play consistently at or near their best.

In short, a Player plays the game, while a Victim lets the game play him.

How to Help Your Players Really Be “Players”

Listen for “Victimspeak” – excuse-making, blaming external circumstances, and an “I-have-nothing-to-do-with-it” attitude. When you hear it, introduce them to the terms Victim and Player. Often just the awareness of the distinction empowers a player to shift his perspective.

Ask him to rate himself 1 to 10 on his approach this past week, where “1” was being a victim (what happened to him determined his mental state) and “10” is being a Player (where he determined his

mental state regardless of his circumstances.) Be sure to ask him to explain his rating.

Finally, **ask questions that steer him toward taking responsibility for whatever is going on.** It can be tempting to console your player when something isn't going well or when something that seems negative happens. You might ask questions like:

- What happened to you?
- What did they do to upset you?
- What should they have done instead?

But these questions lead the player to take the Victim perspective by emphasizing external circumstances, and leave him powerless.

Instead **ask questions that help him adopt the “Player” perspective** such as:

- What challenge did you face?
- How did you choose to respond?
- How could you have responded more effectively?
- Could you have prepared better?
- What can you learn from this?

If he doesn't see himself as part of the problem, he can't be part of the solution.

Each of these questions makes his choices the center of the action, empowering him to take responsibility and act powerfully – to be a Player.

A Recipe for Success

Most professional players have surprisingly little awareness of the role their thoughts, focus, and actions play in their confidence and consistency. They know they can choose to think about

whatever they want, and they know their thoughts largely determine how confident they feel, but they don't make the link of deliberately and consistently thinking thoughts that build their confidence.

So another fundamental way to help a player be more confident and consistent is to **help him become more aware of the thoughts, feelings and actions that contribute to his playing great.** The goal is to enable him to deliberately choose the actions that help him play great rather than leaving things to chance.

“Players” learn to generate from within the focus and feelings that result in their best performances.

Think of it as creating a “recipe for success.” Perhaps your mom has a dish you particularly like and you want to try to make it yourself. You ask her: “How did you do it?” and she gives you the recipe – a list of ingredients and a process for putting them together -- so you can create it yourself. Your early efforts will not likely match your mom's, but as you practice the recipe you start getting consistent excellent results.

Your client has great performances in his past and he'd like to play at that level consistently. So have him think back to a time when he was a “10” on a confidence scale and gave a “gourmet” performance and ask him, “How did you do it?”

Specifically, you can say; “Think of a particular time when you played great. Go back there and put yourself right back into that situation.”

The more vividly he imagines himself there, the more valuable information he'll get. If the situation allows (i.e., you are not

out to dinner), have the player actually show you what he looked like -- stand up and really pretend he is at that great moment. Otherwise he can do it sitting down and it can even be done over the phone.

When he gets himself immersed in that past great experience feeling highly confident, ask questions like:

- What are you thinking?
- What is your attitude?
- How are you moving or carrying your body?
- What are you feeling? Where do you feel confidence?
- What are you focused on?
- How are you breathing?
- What is the look on your face?

Get the “ingredients” and processes he used to create the performance he really liked, and write them down. Then identify the things on the list that he can control -- things he can choose to do anytime.

Chances are his list will include actions like:

- Visualizing hitting his target (the ball or the mitt)
- Imagining himself getting hits or striking batters out
- Moving his body in a confident way (tall, broad, slow, easy)
- Breathing deeply and calmly
- Feeling certainty and a sense of dominance
- Feeling a powerful but effortless swing or delivery
- Self-talk with an attitude like “This guy has no chance against me,” or “I’m going to crush this ball.”

Anyone can generate a boost in confidence if they follow the above guidelines. If they don’t, then they aren’t really trying.

The question becomes: If you can boost your confidence like this anytime, why wouldn’t you do it right before you play?

How to Help Your Players be Consistently Confident

Just like doing squats on a regular basis will enhance the strength of his lower body, doing the above exercise on a regular basis will enhance the strength of his confidence. I suggest my clients do this exercise at least 5 minutes per day. Put on a favorite tune and take yourself back in time to a great performance. Immerse yourself in the performance so you generate a feeling of confidence.

**Great players spend their time thinking about playing great.
Slumping players spend their time thinking about playing poorly.
This isn’t rocket science!**

Hank Aaron told me that pre-game visualization was the main reason for his incredible focus and consistency. He spent time all day long imagining what he wanted to make happen that night.

Making this practice a habit will contribute to a player being consistent.

A player’s “recipe for success” can also be applied during the game. Much of my time working with players is spent helping them develop pre-game and pre-pitch routines that help them generate the mindset that leads to their best performances.

A pre-pitch routine is a set series of actions that helps a player create a feeling of confidence and a powerful focus on his target. Instead of being distracted by

elements of the game outside of his control, the player is focused on executing his routine.

A well-designed, well-practiced routine is the key to playing one pitch at a time. It is the on-the-field key to being consistent.

Players will tell you they have routines, but these are mostly physical routines or superstitions that don't include the mental game elements that make all the difference.

You can read a great deal more about creating routines in "Heads-Up Baseball: Playing the Game One Pitch at a Time."

In review, ask your player questions about his best performances. Be like a detective looking for clues – what are the things he does when he is totally confident that he can choose to do whether he right now feels confident or not? Then help him figure out a way to build those thoughts and actions into routines – pre-game and pre-pitch – so he can be confident and focused more consistently.

Summary

Hopefully the ideas in this article will help you sharpen your asking and listening skills so that you can help your players be more confident and consistent.

Remember, **ask great questions** – ones that put him into the Player perspective (i.e., "How did you choose to respond?") and ones that get him thinking about playing great (i.e., "What do you focus on when you are hitting/pitching with total confidence?").

Then listen. In particular, listen for Victimspeak. If he is whining and complaining and the source of the problem sounds like it is outside of him, he needs an adjustment.

If you would like to take your clients' mental game to the next level, check out the additional information at www.FocusedBaseball.com. Also, please contact me in Tampa at 813-968-863 or Tom@FocusedBaseball.com.

Don't wait for a "need" like a prolonged slump. Be proactive. If there is a gap between where a player is in his performance and where he wants to be (and where you want him to be), it's time to work on developing his mental skills.



Tom Hanson, Ph.D. has studied the mental aspects of baseball for the past 18 years. He has consulted with the New York Yankees, Texas Rangers, Minnesota Twins, Anaheim Angels and hundreds of other professional and amateur players, co-wrote the best-selling book "Heads-Up Baseball: Playing the Game One Pitch at a Time," and coached college baseball for 10 years. He can help you develop mental toughness through coaching, workshops, online courses and audio programs. For more information, contact him at FocusedBaseball.com, or call 813-968-8863.

A related article, "Five Ways to Consistent Confidence" is available free via email. Request it at Tom@FocusedBaseball.com.