

How to Assess Mental Toughness in Recruits

Moneyball for the Mind: Mental Game 2.0

Here are the Questions You Should Be Asking

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The single biggest variable in determining how many games you win this year is how good your players are.

In the first article of this 2-part series I talked about “Moneyball” and the power of identifying and measuring the critical baseball success variables. If your goal is to WIN, physical talent is the top critical variable.

But physical talent alone isn’t sufficient to win.

In my first year as hitting coach at the University of Virginia back in the early 1990’s we had so-so talent but great leadership and team chemistry. We had a really good season and made a nice run in the ACC tournament.

We “over-performed” our talent level.

The next year we had better talent and expected an even better season. But our leadership and chemistry were lacking and we “under-performed” our talent level. In fact, it was one of those seasons that couldn’t end soon enough.

Neither physical talent nor the “intangibles” such as leadership and team chemistry are sufficient to win big. Championships are won by teams with both talent **and** the “intangibles.”

You’re a good judge of physical talent, but how do you recruit great leaders and team chemistry guys? Until now, it’s been “luck” or “intuition” in the recruiting process – even at the pro level.

When I worked for the New York Yankees I was told, “We’re great at assessing the five physical tools, but we’re weak at assessing a player’s make-up.”

In pro ball, physical tools can get you to AA, but you need a Big League make-up to play in the Big Leagues. Getting players to AA doesn’t pay the bills.

Likewise, college and high school teams don’t go to their World Series or state tourney on talent alone.

“How Do You Measure Mental Toughness?”

I led a break out discussion at the ABCA Convention in Anaheim this year, and the burning question of the night was: “How can I assess the mental toughness of the players I’m recruiting?”

Some excellent answers include noticing:

- How a player carries himself
- How teammates respond to him
- What his coach says about him
- How he responds to adversity

Most smart coaches say they want to see a player fail so they can see how he responds. Anyone can be “mentally tough” when they’re playing well.

But if he’s a stud player you may have to go see him several times before he fails!

And since he knows you’re looking at him he’s apt to be on his best behavior. As a result, you can’t get a good look at what really drives his behavior: his unconscious belief system.

On top of that, the one time you see him face adversity may be an aberration – it may not be how he normally responds.

So although “make-up” is a vital ingredient to your success (and enjoyment of your job!) assessing make- up:

1. Is totally subjective
2. Costs a lot of time and travel money.

My 10 Year Quest for Answers

I’ve tried to solve this problem for 10 years.

I tested many profiles that year with the Yankees and even flew in some experts to demonstrate their profiles.

The profile I deemed best, based on the depth of the knowledge gained from the profile and the players’ and coaches’ reaction to them, was called the Hartman Values Profile.

The Hartman has been shown to match or beat even the most powerful profiles used in formal psychology.

But the items on the profile had nothing to do with baseball. The report you got was hard to interpret and had nothing to do with baseball.

When the expert we brought in to discuss the findings said what they meant, the power of the profile was jaw-dropping. (It even correctly predicted one player's chronic injury problem!)

But because we needed the expert to get the real benefits of the profile and the items on it were weird for baseball players to work with, we shelved it.

For the past 10 years I've kept my eye on the Hartman, looking for opportunities to create a baseball-specific, baseball-friendly version of it.

This summer I got the opportunity to team up with Hartman guru's Dr. Dave and Vera Mefford: They provided the mathematical horsepower, and I provided the baseball expertise and language.

The result is the most exciting breakthrough for baseball scouting and recruiting since the introduction of the radar gun.

How the Play Big Profile Works

The profile is taken on line in about 20 minutes. Players simply drag and drop items to rank order a randomly presented list of 18 items two separate times. The items themselves aren't random, each has specific properties.

Items are familiar baseball language like "a foul ball," "a solid base hit," "a well-respected coach," and "a bad call against your team."

The task for the player is simple. The math behind the analysis of his responses is staggeringly complex. I didn't make this up. Scientific research has validated the profile over four decades.

The profile measures what a player "values."

From moment to moment, we each pay attention to what we value most.

By being forced to rank order the items, the player reveals to us what he values, what he pays attention to in both the "external game" (what's visibly happening on the field) and the "internal game" (what's happening inside of him).

In essence, the profile is asking...

"What's His Operating System?"

My cool new iPhone 4s runs much faster and can do many things my iPhone 2 couldn't do. Why? It has a superior operating system.

The Play Big Profile measures a player's operating system.

Virtually any other profile you'll come across measures what "program" the player is running. That's important to know, but not nearly as important as knowing the power of his operating system. A powerful operating system can run many programs and those programs can be easily changed.

It's much harder to change operating systems.

A program you're running on your computer determines what appears on your monitor screen right now. The operating system determines what COULD appear on that screen.

You can't run "Call of Duty 3" on PlayStation 1 (ask a player).

When you buy a smart phone or a computer the critical question is *not* "what programs does it have?" The critical question is "What operating system does it run?"

"Will it run the programs I need it to run?" "How fast will it run them?" "How reliable and stable is it?"

When you recruit a player you need to ask: "Can this recruit run my 'program' on his operating system?" "Does he have the capacity to contribute to an 'Omaha-level' (or your equivalent) program?"

Let me break this down into more familiar, manageable terms...

The Questions You Should Ask

As noted in Part 1 of this series, the mental game is divided into two worlds: the External Mental Game and the Internal Mental Game.

Here are questions you may have about a player's "operating system" – which literally is his "belief system" -- that the Play Big Profile report gives you mathematically derived, statistically validated answers to:

External Mental Game Questions:

- What's his "Baseball IQ?" How good is his understanding of what it takes to win a baseball game?
- How well does he control his emotions during a game?
- Will he be a plus or minus team chemistry guy?
- How well does he understand the tactics and mechanics of winning baseball (what to do when)?
- How will he relate to my authority? Will he be compliant or defiant?

Internal Mental Game Questions:

- How free is he to play? Will the physical skills I see in practice show up in games?
- Does he keep his composure when adversity hits him personally?

- How good does he feel about himself as a person? Will he ride the Results Roller Coaster or is he Jeter-solid in his sense of self-worth, independent of his stats?
- How strong is his “inner drive?” How bad does he want it?
- Does he have any personal problems he’s dealing with right now?
- Is he “all in” with his current team and role on that team?
- Is he “playing big” now or does he have some performance problems?
- How confident is he he’ll succeed in the future?
- How mentally tough is he? Will he persist in the face of failure?

Additional Questions The Play Big Profile Report answers:

- How good a decision maker is he?
- How powerful is his intuition?
- How well can he concentrate?
- How good will he be under pressure? What’s his stress tolerance?
- Can he lead?

NOTE: Players can’t “fake” responses – at least not and get away with it. He has to rank a wide range of items and it isn’t intuitively obvious which ones “should” come first. He can’t avoid revealing his belief system.

The Future

These are the critical variables I’m tracking now. I’m excited because we can now reliably measure a player’s mental game capacities in a comparable way to how we measure his physical game capacities.

In addition to recruiting advantages, the profile gives us specific targets for player development.

Instead of saying “he needs a better mental game,” we can specifically target the source of his constraints.

Mental Game 2.0 is focused on identifying the underlying belief/operating system constraints keeping a player from playing with freedom. We then upgrading his system using break through performance enhancing technologies – but that’s a topic for another time).

The Play Big Profile has enhanced my 1-1 coaching with players enormously.

A team can take the profile and find its overall strengths and weaknesses and I’ll soon have free training for coaches on how to use The Play Big Profile to improve performance and recruiting. Stay up to date at www.PlayBigBaseball.com.

Dr. Tom Hanson is co-author of the classic book **“Heads-Up Baseball: Playing the Game One Pitch at a Time”** and his latest best seller, **“PlayBig: Mental Toughness Secrets that Take Baseball Players to the Next Level.”** He is also creator of the Hanson Play Big Profile, which measures the critical variables in the mental game.

Claim your “Baseball Mental Toughness Manual” and take the Hanson Play Big Baseball Profile at www.PlayBigBaseball.com

Dr. Hanson is also a leading expert at eliminating the “yips” throwing problem. Watch his free video explaining how to overcome this problem at www.YipsBeGone.com