

MoneyBall for the Mental Game

Hanson Launches Mental Game 2.0

How to Identify, Measure and Improve the Critical Variables of the Mental Game

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Attention is the “currency” of baseball.

A player can only “pay” attention to a few things and what he attends to determines his performance.

Focusing on “don’t walk this guy” is less effective for a pitcher than “this pitch is going to that target.”

Focusing on trying to “prove yourself” to a coach is less effective than simply “being yourself” on the field.

We learned in the book and movie *Moneyball* how the Oakland A’s benefitted by paying attention to variables most teams ignored. They, for one, saw the relationship between on-base percentage and runs scored more clearly than other teams and valued qualities in players differently from other teams.

As a result, they got valuable players cheap and were a great “wins-per-salary-dollar” team.

(They also valued and got great pitching, which wasn’t portrayed in the movie. On base percentage is important but not sufficient to win.)

Simply put, great coaches figure out the best things to pay attention to and get their players focused on those things.

How do you get players focused on something you think is important?

If You Want to Improve Something...

“If you want to improve something, measure it.”

This is a basic maxim in the business world. Good managers know they can't just say “I want to get better” and expect improvement.

Successful baseball coaches measure things they believe are important. I noticed during World Series coverage the Texas Rangers track a quality at bat system. They believe if they get 17 quality at-bats (as they define them) they'll win.

I'm a fan of coaches like Ron Wolforth and Perry Husband in part because they've figured out the important things to measure and they measure them.

When you measure someone's “X,” they pay attention to their “X” – and that attention will almost always create improvement.

This gives us a two-step process for high-end coaching:

1. Identify the critical variables for winning baseball games (or whatever your goal is)
2. Measure them

The Mental Game is a Critical Variable!

Thanks to the work of Dr. Ken Ravizza and others, the mental game is steadily gaining its rightful place as a variable coaches pay attention to in baseball.

For years coaches and players have told me the mental game is 80% of performance on a given day.

They then admit they don't work on the mental game much. Coaches are doing more each year with the mental game, but progress has been slow.

Why? For one our masculine culture sees anything to do with thinking and feeling as threatening to their manhood. “Talking mental game means you have a problem.”

Agents have told me: “Fortunately I don't have anyone that needs your services.”

That's like saying, “None of my players need strength or physical conditioning.”

Greats like Hank Aaron, Rod Carew, Nolan Ryan, Pete Rose and many more have told me the mental game was THE key to their success.

But if you're still reading this article you are enlightened enough to know the importance of confidence, focus, and team chemistry

You just want to get better at building them. Now I'll explain why progress has been so slow for you.

The End of Mental Game 1.0

Mental game 1.0 says "Yes, the mental game is important. We need to be confident, relax, do routines, visualize, flush the negatives, focus, and build a cohesive team."

That is all true and it's not going away.

But to this point we've done a poor job of breaking down the mental game and analyzing its components.

The A's broke down "offense" and isolated on base percentage as a critical variable.

Emphasizing it and measuring it dramatically improved their performance and ushered in a new era of effectiveness in the front office and on the field.

We need to break down "the mental game" and isolate the critical variables inside of it.

We then need to measure them.

Doing this is no small step forward. It's a quantum leap. It's the difference between saying a pitcher "throws hard" and saying he throws "91-92." One is an opinion, the other a fact.

Until now we've only had opinions about a player's mental game, not facts.

The only way to measure a player's mental game was his on field performance.

But if a batter grounds sharply into a double play to end a game is he a "choker?" If the same batter had been fooled on a pitch but won the game with a swinging bunt dribbler is he "clutch?"

We need a way to assess a player's mental game the way we assess throwing velocity, running speed, bat speed and pop times.

This article launches Mental Game 2.0. I'll start by making some distinctions about the mental game to identify the critical variables inside the mental game. Then I'll tell you how they can be measured, and ultimately improved.

If you need to evaluate and/or develop players, this is a game-changer.

The 2 Worlds of the Mental Game

The "mental game" is usually thought of as one whole "thinking and emotions" domain, but its best divided "External" and "Internal" mental games.

The External Mental Game refers to how well a player sees and understands what creates success on the field in baseball. It's how well he "gets" what you have to do to win. You could call it his "Baseball IQ."

The guy with a great External Mental Game does the little things well – takes an extra base, backs up throws, anticipates plays. He's also a great teammate and organizational guy.

He plays what is normally called "heads-up baseball."

Derek Jeter sees the game better than the average player. He knows the critical variables to pay attention to... and he pays attention to them. He plays "heads-up" with his high Baseball IQ.

The External Mental Game is divided into three categories. The first has to do with relationships with teammates and coaches.

Key questions here include: Does a player understand the importance of his teammates? Is he emotionally connected with them or does he keep his distance? Does he try to fix issues on the team or does he ignore them?

The teams we see dog piling after winning championships are full of players emotionally connected to their team. Underperforming teams are loaded with emotionally disconnected players.

Wouldn't it be nice to know a player's ability to emotionally connect with his team... before you ever even meet him?

The second dimension of the External Mental Game is how well a player understands the mechanical and tactical aspects of the game. It covers the “cause and effect” relationships of individual and team actions.

If a player were a robot, these are the things you would program him to do.

Questions here include: Does he see and understand what actions must be taken to win? What physically has to happen to succeed? Does he understand the mechanics of his swing or delivery?

The final dimension of the External Mental Game is how well a player understands the rules, techniques and strategies of the game. It involves the standards, principles, organization, policies, rules and all elements establishing discipline, structure, and order.

Questions here include: How cooperative and respectful is he toward coaches, umpires and team rules? Is he overly dependent on his coaches? How does he respond when decisions are made he disagrees with?

All of the questions asked above address the “External” mental game of a player – his Baseball IQ.

I’m assuming I don’t have to tell you how important those variables are to winning baseball.

The Internal Mental Game

The Internal Mental Game is how well a player can access his talent. Even if he knows and can see what there is to do on the field (he has a strong External Mental Game), he needs a strong Internal Mental Game to actually DO those things.

I refer to this as his “Baseball EQ” (emotional quotient or emotional intelligence).

Like the External Mental Game, the Internal Mental Game also has three dimensions.

The first is a player’s sense of self-worth. Does the player see himself as unique and valuable as a person regardless of his stats? Or does he feel that when he’s 0 for 4 he is a worthless or bad person?

A player with a strong sense of self-worth plays with more freedom because he doesn’t see each pitch as a “life or death” event.

Fear, as discussed in depth in my new book *Play Big: Mental Toughness Secrets that Take Baseball Players to the Next Level*, is a “low vibration” energy. Playing with fear drains your energy.

Emotional freedom is the key to consistent, high level performance. Fear brings tension and distraction – a player’s two mortal enemies.

The second Internal Mental Game dimension is a player’s ability to be at peace with his role as a baseball player. Does he feel at home in his role on the team or does he feel like a round peg in a square hole? And how does he respond when problems arise... can he absorb them and move on or does he get stuck in them?

The more out of sync a player is with his role on the team the more “drag” there is on his energy, and therefore his performance.

The final dimension of the Internal Mental Game is his ability to maintain a “winning mindset.” Is he mentally tough? How strong is his vision for his future in the game? Does he have the discipline and commitment necessary to make his dream come true?

This is the one dimension most associated with “the mental game.” But as you can see it is only part of it.

Four Additional Critical Variables

Additional critical variables that combine External and Internal mental game capacities include:

- **Decision-making ability:** How clearly can a player see the situation he’s in and thus make good decisions? Vital decisions range from whether or not to dive for a fly ball to which friends to hang out with on Friday night.
- **Intuition:** How well can a player anticipate what’s going to happen next? This is his “6th sense” that you can’t coach.
- **Concentration:** How well can a player maintain focus throughout a game? Hank Aaron said his record-breaking career hinged on his ability to concentrate.
- **Stress:** How much stress does a player experience and how well does he deal with it?

Again, the importance of these variables to baseball performance is obvious.

How to Measure the Mental Game

I began the article emphasizing two elements to coaching (and therefore playing) success:

1. Identify and emphasize baseball's critical variables, and
2. Measure them

So far I'm half-way there – I've pointed out the critical variables in the mental game. But how do you measure them?

Until recently, I too was stuck in Mental Game 1.0. Evolving from a "cognitive-behavioral" approach to the "energy psychology" approach dramatically improved my ability to improve player performance and freedom.

This approach is so powerful I became highly successful at overcoming the "yips" throwing problem that had stumped coaches (and me) for decades (see www.YipsBeGone.com).

So I had moved to Mental Game 2.0 in how I help players upgrade their belief systems and play with more freedom, but I still had no systematic way to assess the critical variables of players I hadn't coached for several sessions.

Then this summer I stumbled upon a genius husband and wife team in rural Tennessee who have been perfecting a profile for the last 40 years. We teamed up to create the Hanson Play Big Baseball Profile that measures, with mathematical certainty, each of the variables mentioned above.

A player – or coach who wants to know his own biases and limitations – simply completes two tasks where he is forced to make a series of decisions. The decisions he makes reveal his "operating system," how he processes information.

He's instantly given a set of scores that are as simple to read as a radar gun that tell you his baseball IQ (External Mental Game ability) and his EQ (Internal Mental Game ability). Each of the three dimensions of each are broken down and tracked on a 1 to 10 scale so you can specifically identify strengths and weaknesses.

A coach therefore knows about the player's make up – a recruit or a current player – the way he knows the player's arm strength.

It's like a mental game MRI – it reveals what's going on inside in a way that can't be faked.

In a future article I'll go into depth on the workings of The Hanson Play Big Baseball Profile and why I'd bet my career on the results it produces (sort of like betting that stopwatches actually time things).

A Glimpse of the Future

As Mental Game 2.0 takes root in the game I see the standard of baseball played at all levels improving as players and coaches focus their energies on the critical variables of the mental game. I also see – at the same time – the game becoming more fun and fulfilling for players because they're able to identify and remove their internal blocks now holding them back.

As a result they more consistently play near their best.

Right now those blocks are hidden from them. Players are underperforming but can't put their finger on why, so they desperately grasp for a change in their mechanics, hoping that holds the answer.

But for most that's like mowing your lawn when you have a weed problem.

The root of performance is a player's belief system. It's in how he processes the information baseball gives him. That's what must be distinguished and measured for optimal growth and performance.

I see the best coaches grabbing the Mental Game 2.0 advantage first because they understand the power of the mental game and the importance of the relationships they have with their players (that's why they're the best coaches).

One top DI coach, for example, wrote and said his prime mission is to get to know his players well so he can communicate effectively. He correctly sees Play Big Baseball Profile as a way to dramatically speed that process.

I'll soon have free training for coaches on how to use The Hanson Play Big Profile to improve performance and recruiting.

In closing, my secret agenda is for baseball to be an "evolutionary" experience for players, coaches and parents. That is, their participation in it transforms them into a more powerful, happy, and fulfilled person who has a great life.

I hope this article nudges you in that direction.

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