



5 Ways To Coach Mental Toughness

by Tom Hanson, Ph.D.

Mental toughness is the ability to consistently play at or near your best regardless of circumstances. Coaches and players generally agree that the mental game is the most important element of baseball, yet most coaches know much more about the mechanics of the game than the mental aspects.

In this report, I discuss five ways to help develop mental toughness in your players.

Coaching a team is complex: much more art than science. It would be arrogant (and foolish) of me to come up with a list of things to do and tell you "Do this and this and this and your team will be mentally tough." The ideas I'm presenting in this report are just that – ideas. You need to know yourself, you need to know your team to determine what you need to do.

1. LISTEN TO YOUR TEAM'S "LEVEL 3"

Three levels of conversation are now taking place on your team.

Level 1 is the conversations each person is having in his head. We are always talking to ourselves. Yours is the voice you hear as you read these words.

Level 2 conversations are the words that are spoken out loud. This is what you usually think of when you hear the word "conversation." It's what people are saying.

Level 3 conversations are what is there but people aren't saying. It's the unwritten rules, values and assumptions of the team. It includes the team's mood, energy level, level of respect and the expectations the team has for success.

All three have important implications for mental toughness, but I want to highlight Level 3 because it's the least familiar.

Level 3 is like radio waves. Think of how a radio works. We can't see the sound waves, but we know they are there because our radios can pick them up and give us music and news. Similarly, your team

has "energy waves" that are there but you can't see them, but if you "tune in," you can gain a wealth of invaluable information.

Great coaches are great Level 3 listeners. They sense what's going on, they feel it.

When I was a head college coach, particularly in my early years, I was often too caught up in my daily activities to really be connected with my team. I was into "doing" things. It's easy to fall into the trap of thinking that if you just do more, your team will get better.

It helps to remember to stop and listen...

What is going on at "Level 3" for my team? What is the current energy level? Is the team bright or dull? Heavy or light? Focused or scattered? What are the "unwritten rules" on the team? On my staff?

When I interviewed Hank Aaron several years ago he attributed much of his success to his ability to tune in to what a pitcher was doing. Success in coaching depends largely on your ability to tune in to your team's Level 3 because that's where the information is that tells you what to do and what to say.

If the team is flat you may need to push them harder. If there are internal rivalries pulling the team apart you may need a team meeting or several individual meetings. Perhaps the team is upset about something and it is distracting them from the game.

The possibilities of what could be going on at Level 3 are endless, but the ability to tune in to them and the wisdom of how to handle them is inside you. The key is to remember to ask yourself the question: What's going on at Level 3?

Basketball's Phil Jackson, one of the great mental toughness coaches of all time, says "being aware is better than being smart." Be aware of your team's Level

2. BE MENTALLY TOUGH YOURSELF

The second way to coach mental toughness is to be mentally tough yourself. You too must be able to consistently be at or near your best regardless of circumstances.

Be "congruent" with your message. "Do as I say, not as I do" is a tough sell. Players see through coaches who don't walk their talk.

Your mood profoundly affects your team's Level 3, so take care of yourself. Flight attendants always tell you on an airplane "in the unlikely event of a loss of cabin pressure and you are traveling with small children, put your own mask on first."

You can't be of much help to someone else if you are not in a place of strength. One way to be in a place of strength is to be in good physical condition. A lot of out of shape coaches have won championships, so it's not a hard and fast rule that a coach must be in great shape. But the way you look from the outside is a great measure of what is going on inside you emotionally. The way you treat your body affects how your players will treat theirs.

Your integrity is another mental toughness measure. Do you do what you say you are going to do?

I read in the book "The Millionaire Next Door" that in a survey of over 600 millionaires, honesty was the one quality the millionaires felt was most important to their success. Because of the huge affect it has on the Level 3 of your club, I suspect the same might be true in coaching baseball.

Finally, your ability to manage your emotions during games largely determines your ability to manage your team. Being cool under pressure and being "on" during the slow times are skills you can cultivate. Mental preparation is key.

So your own mental toughness contributes to your players being mentally tough. Another key is to...

3. COACH BY ASKING QUESTIONS

Most coaches use a “command” method. That is, they tell their players what to do. “Stay back,” “Follow through more,” “Keep the back side tall,” “Get your butt down,” and so on.

Think about it, though. Who is the one who has to perform on game day? The player.

Are you able to coach the player on each pitch? No.

So where does the knowledge need to be of what the player needs to do? In the player!

When you tell the player what he is doing wrong or right, his primary source of feedback is outside of himself, namely, in you. But when he's playing in a game, he needs to be able to make adjustments on his own. He needs to feel what he's doing, especially in pressure situations.

The best way to help a player learn to feel is to coach him by asking questions, rather than by giving him commands. When he has to answer a question about what he feels, his focus of attention is on gaining awareness of himself (the key to making adjustments) rather than on pleasing you.

Say a pitcher is rushing in his delivery. You give him a command: “Stay back.”

He should respond: “How much?”

Isn't it possible to stay back too much? Yes. So is “stay back” the best coaching you can come up with?

How about asking him: “Did you stay back on that pitch?” or, “What did you feel on that pitch?”

Now the conversation moves out of your world, and into his. Instead of half his brain wondering what you are going to say, he'll focus on the best teacher of all, his own experience.

Try this one. Tell him you'd like to use a 10-point scale, where 1 is totally rushing forward toward the plate, and 10 is nearly falling back off the rubber toward second base. Right in the middle is a 5.

Let him throw a pitch. Then ask: What would you rate that pitch on our 1 to 10 scale?

Let him throw 2 or 3 more without any comments from you, each time giving you a number according to what he felt. Just listen and watch, don't agree or disagree.

Now you can ask him to show you what a 7 would look like. How about a 2? Play with it, let him experiment to gain feel. Don't rush into right and wrong. Remember that what you think is right may feel very wrong to him.

By asking questions and using a 1-10 scale, you establish a common ground for the conversation. Hearing his answers lets you into his world. You get a sense of what is going on for him that you don't get if you just tell him what to do.

Focusing on feel, he may make a helpful adjustment on his own. You may also reach a point where you suggest he “stay back at about a 6 or 7,” rather than just saying “stay back.” In my opinion, that's better coaching.

This approach is also very respectful of the player. Asking him what he feels honors his knowledge and builds rapport, both of which help make him better mentally.

4. TEACH YOUR GUYS TO BREATHE

The deep breath is one of the most powerful tools for mental toughness. Roger Clemens, one of the most mentally tough players ever, takes one or more before every pitch.

When players get nervous, their bodies get tight, stiff, and mechanical. Their breath gets shallow or even stops. This is where we get the term “choke” (it happens to coaches, too...).

They feel fear. They feel rattled, off balance, and the game seems to speed up.

Why does this happen? Why is it that in our most important moments, our bodies do the exact opposite thing we want them to?

The tension comes from the perception that we are in a threatening or dangerous situation. It has its roots in prehistoric times, when our ancestors faced life-threatening situations daily.

It's called the “Fight or Flight” response. The body tenses in preparation to fight a life or death battle -- or run like hell. So the blood goes in to the big muscles in the body and out of the smaller muscles. Lack of blood flow is why your hands may get clammy and you may lose your “touch” and control in your fingers when you are nervous.

Although this blood rush to the big muscles is great if you are going to battle saber tooth tigers, it's not so great if you are battling the Detroit Tigers. Baseball isn't about big efforts. It's about precision, timing, touch and feel.

Our civilization has progressed much faster than our bodies have evolved. We often perceive events to be life-threatening that really aren't. Bases loaded in the bottom of the ninth might seem like the end of the world is near, but it's just a contrived situation all will survive.

But our bodies get the message that we're being threatened and respond the best way they know how. So you need some way to deal with this reaction.

That's where the deep breath comes in. It counteracts the body's reaction to the perceived threat, relaxes the muscles, and allows blood flow to the smaller muscles that are so important to precision performance.

To breathe, simply draw air in through the mouth or nose as deep into the belly as comfortable, then let go and allow (don't force) the air out through relaxed lips and cheeks. Advocate or even require it between pitches, even in practice.

Ken Ravizza and I talk a lot more about it in our book, Heads-Up Baseball, and at the end of this report you can find out more about my latest project where I cover the breath in depth.

5. FOCUS ON THE PROCESS

Players don't get nervous about playing, they get nervous about what might happen as a result of their playing.

Focusing them on the process of playing the game rather than on the outcomes helps them be at their best regardless of circumstances.

Whatever you comment on and reward them for, they learn to focus on. If you focus your pitchers on getting batters out (something they actually can't control) and your hitters on getting hits (something they actually can't control) you create a pressurized environment.

I'm not saying forget about winning.

When I had my first college head coaching job many years ago I went too far with this idea. I misunderstood what it meant to focus on the process and my guys got into playing “beautifully,” but lacked the will to win.

Winning is actually part of the process. Playing to win is a great mindset for a player to be in. Focus on the process with the will to win.

My suggestion here is to simply observe yourself. Notice whether you are outcome focused (such as a batter getting a hit or a pitcher getting a batter out) or process focused (such as players' routines and approach).

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